

Focusing on the Foundations of Christian Camping

So, what's fun about camp? For one thing, being in the great outdoors—God's classroom! Such an environment affords many opportunities to communicate spiritual truths to campers and outdoor education participants of all ages, helping them learn more about God and His creation. The outdoor setting is a wonderful place to impart such knowledge for several reasons:

- Campers and outdoor education participants are far away from the demands and stresses of everyday life such as academic studies, extra-curricular activities, jobs, and social pressures.
- The environment is bursting with natural object lessons and illustrations.
- Camp's quiet places make it possible to listen to God's voice and recharge mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Camp staff love God and His creation. Who better to share about what God teaches through nature?

"Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you, or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you."
—Job 12:7-8

Finding spiritual truth in nature is easy, even if you don't know a lot of doctrine. Choose a natural object or setting that Scripture describes, lead your

campers or outdoor education participants to that spot, and let the discussion begin! But first, you'll find it helpful to learn (or review) some Bible verses to use as you lead discussions.

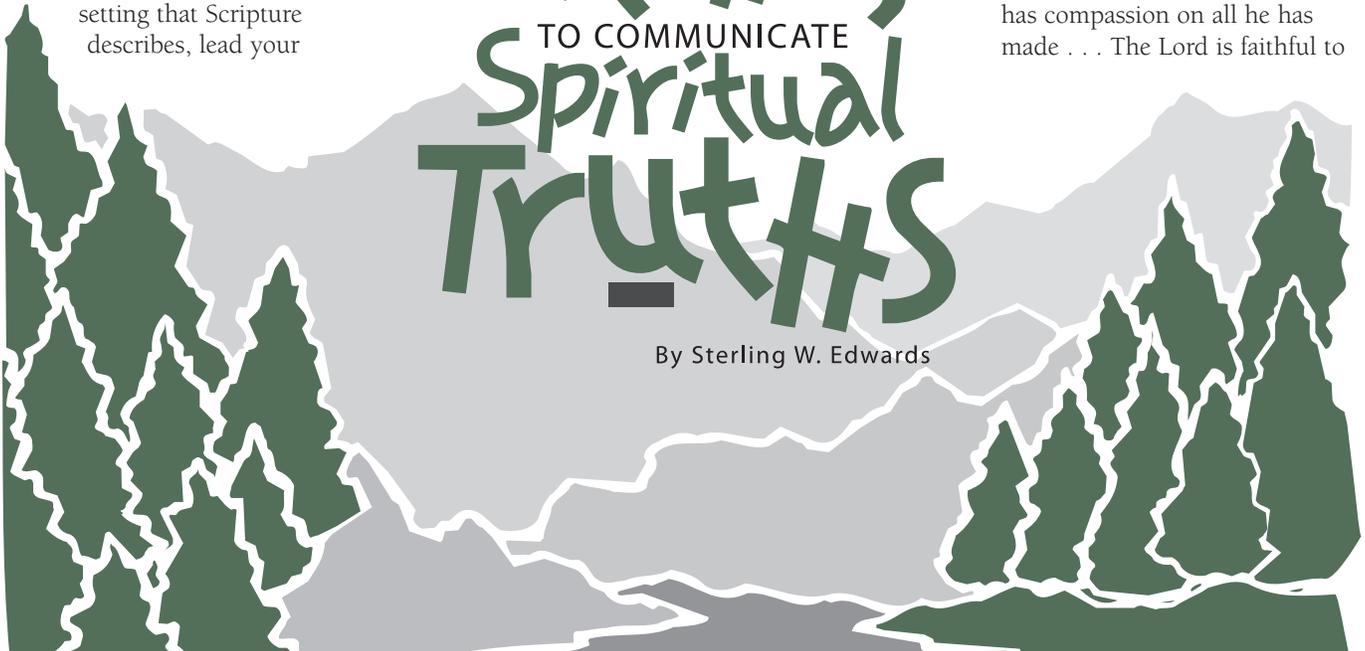
The Big Picture Through God's Eyes

Start your search for spiritual truth in outdoor settings by walking through God's Word on your own. Do a little personal searching about spiritual truths, then you'll be ready to teach others. Here are some basics:

1. God made creation. He owns it. Many outdoor education participants and campers have only heard the secular view of nature—a humanist or evolutionist view. Others might have some idea of what the Bible says about creation. You can help people see creation through new eyes: biblical or spiritual eyes. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters" (Ps. 24:1-2).

Other Scriptures to study: Genesis 1-2; Leviticus 25:23; Psalm 50:10-12.

2. God loves creation. He cares for it. Most campers and outdoor education participants know that God loves the people He created. But do they know that He also loves *everything* He created? "The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made . . . The Lord is faithful to



USING THE **Outdoor** Settings TO COMMUNICATE **Spiritual Truths**

By Sterling W. Edwards

all his promises and loving toward all he has made" (Ps. 145:9, 13b).

Other verses to study: Psalm 145:16-17.

3. God reveals Himself through His creation. In addition to the written word—the Bible—God speaks through His created world. Give outdoor ed participants and campers lots of chances to observe the pages of God's "creation book."

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

Another passage to study: Psalm 19:1-3.

4. Creation provides great opportunities for worshipping the Creator.

Creation can stir campers and outdoor ed participants to awe, praise, thanksgiving, adoration, and other acts of worship. Creation reflects the wisdom and power of

God, and camps give guests unique places for outdoor worship through singing, writing, dance, drama, prayer, and celebration.

Worship softens hearts and minds to receive spiritual truth.

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (Rev. 4:11).

Other Scriptures to study: Psalms 147, 148, 149, 150.

Spiritual Intimacy Through Creation

Armed with these basics, you can start showing campers and outdoor ed participants where to look for spiritual truth as you walk with them in the woods, hike a mountain, or canoe a river. A simple way to build a discussion on nature is found in Job 37:14: "Listen to this, Job; stop and consider God's wonders."

Stop! Now look, listen, smell, taste, and touch creation. Slow down, use all your senses, get up close and personal with nature.

Consider! Then ask the questions, "What spiritual truths or lessons does God want to teach here? How does this speak to me personally about my relationship with the Lord, my inner life, lifestyle, behavior, relationships, and other life issues?" The following scenarios illustrate how you could show campers or outdoor ed participants spiritual intimacy through creation.

Scenario 1:

A camp counselor led his middle school campers into a forest to examine a tree. He started a discussion about what makes a tree normal and healthy, based loosely on Matthew 7:15-20 (which talks about knowing people by their "fruit").

"What are some ways you can tell a tree is healthy?" he asked his campers. His campers gave answers like: "All the branches have leaves." "The trunk has bark all the way around." "When you bend a branch, it's strong and it just bends; it doesn't snap off."

Then he asked, "Thinking about those answers, what are some ways you can tell if a Christian is 'healthy'?" Some answers: "Others can see our 'fruit' like you can see a tree's leaves." "Like healthy branches, God helps us stand against strong wind or storms without breaking."

Then he had the campers walk to a nearby tree where they saw that the trunk was rotted out from the top to the ground.

The counselor asked, "How can you tell if a tree isn't healthy?" He heard answers like: "You'll see dead branches." "It might be oozing sap from rotten parts." "Bugs might get in and leave a disease."

Now the counselor asked, "What are some ways Christians might be unhealthy?" Answers: "They might feel dead or rotting on the inside." "They affect others around them with their sin." "Even a little sin might spread inside and pull them totally away from God."

Then the counselor asked, "So, what spiritual truth is this tree teaching us?"

Several campers suddenly saw some spiritual truth: "We can look good on the outside, but we can have sin on the inside!" "People look at the outside, but God looks at the heart!"

Finally, the counselor asked the campers to think about their own hearts. Did they have any rotten spots to deal with? Did they just put on a good outside when sin inside was eating away at them? The counselor then led the group in a time of prayer, closing with these words: "God, we thank You that You heal our hearts of the sin and rottenness inside us. Help us to know that You're the Master Gardener who wants His

"I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw." —Proverbs 24:32



plants to be healthy. Thank You that You take care of us. Amen.”

Scenario 2:

A counselor challenged a group of campers to look around God’s creation for simple natural objects, animals, and plants. She asked them to collect the items if doing so wouldn’t disturb the setting. Otherwise, they were to just make a list and note a few observations. Later, participants worked in small teams to identify the natural items and think about a simple spiritual truth or lesson the items revealed. Here are a few of their insights:

- **Acorn**—If you hide an acorn or store it on a shelf, it doesn’t do any good. But if you plant it and give it a chance to grow, it will bring new life—like God’s Word planted in us does.
- **Baby rabbit**—It needs its mother to nurture it for a while, like young Christians need faithful parents, teachers, and other mature people in their lives to nurture them.
- **Bark**—A protective armor for trees, which reminds us of the spiritual armor we need.
- **Birds**—Their lovely songs remind us of how beautiful our worship is to God’s ears.
- **Chipmunks**—These little creatures work hard to find and store food for the winter. God desires that we work hard, and He gives us hope for the future as well.
- **Flower**—We can radiate God’s love like flowers radiate beauty.
- **Fungus**—It needs something dead to feed on, like the sin that feeds our old nature.

- **Seeds**—The wind spreads them to start new trees or flowers; we spread God’s Word by witnessing to others.
- **Sky**—Its endlessness reminds us that God is everywhere.
- **Twigs**—When they fall from the tree, they die; we can’t live apart from God.

Where Spiritual Truth Becomes Personal

Maybe you’re already thinking of places you can take campers and outdoor ed participants to discover spiritual truths in God’s great outdoors. Some of these places may seem obvious—they’re places you take campers every day. But look at places all around your camp or conference with fresh eyes and consider how they might spark spiritual lessons or discussions:

- Canoe, raft, and kayak trips
- Mountain hiking
- Nature photography walks
- Nighttime outdoor activities
- Outdoor quiet or solo times
- Searching and collecting
- Wetlands discoveries
- Animal tracks or rare plants
- Bike or horse trips
- Snowshoeing and cross-country skiing

More Creation Scriptures

As you take campers and outdoor ed participants to some of the places listed above, the following verses might help you use natural object lessons to teach spiritual truths. The goal with these and many other verses about God’s created world is to learn spiritual truth *from* creation by being *in* creation. So, with Bible

and notebook in hand, go outside and look for these things. You’ll enhance the spiritual experiences of your campers and outdoor ed participants through prayer, Bible study, group discussions, and personal applications that reinforce the spiritual truths they discover outdoors.

Rocks and mountains:

- Psalm 18:2: The Lord is a rock and fortress.
- Nahum 1:5: God has power over mountains.

Darkness and light:

- Job 12:22: God makes darkness light.
- Colossians 1:12-14: God rescues people from darkness.

Astronomy:

- Psalm 104:19 and Jeremiah 31:35: God controls the moon and sun.
- Psalm 147:4-5: God numbers and names all the stars.
- 1 Kings 8:27: God can’t be contained.
- Psalm 19:1: Even the heavens proclaim God’s glory.



Water, waves, floods, erosion:

- John 7:38-39 and Psalm 36:7-9: God provides life-giving water.
- Isaiah 30:28a: God's power is like a rushing current.
- John 4:6-14: Jesus is the living water.
- Isaiah 48:18: God provides peace like a river and righteousness like waves.

Atmosphere, weather, clouds, precipitation:

- Matthew 5:43-45: God's blessing (the rain) falls on the righteous and unrighteous.
- Isaiah 28:2: God's strength is like a storm.
- John 3:8 and Acts 2:1-4: Wind is like the Holy Spirit.
- Hebrews 6:7: Like rain helps crops grow, God provides what we need to grow spiritually.

Animals:

- Psalm 50:10-11: Animals belong to God.
- Psalm 100:3: We are God's sheep.
- Deuteronomy 32:9-11: God's care for us is like the eagle's for its young.

Plants:

- Psalm 1:1-3: We'll produce fruit like trees when we study God's Word.
- John 15:5: Like branches on a vine, we are part of Christ.
- Luke 12:27-28: God provides for us as He provides for flowers.



In the camp outdoor setting, you, the leader, are the key to opening both the natural realm and the spiritual realm of creation to campers and outdoor ed participants. When you see creation learning as a high priority and a core value in your ministry, the integration of both realms becomes a curriculum reality. Take the time to make it happen.

For Further Reading

The following resources will help you in your study of the connection between creation and spiritual topics:

- *Bible Readings on God's Creation*, by Denise J. Williamson (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1987)
- *Encyclopedia of Bible Truths: For School Subjects*, by Ruth C. Haycock, (Association of Christian Schools International, 1993). (800) 367-0798
- *Celebrating the Wonder of Creation* (Discovery Series booklet), by Dean Ohlman (Radio Bible Class Ministries, 1998)
- *Character Sketches* (Three-volume set)

(Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1985). (800) 398-1290; www.iblp.org

- *Creation Care, A Christian Environment Quarterly*, Evangelical Environmental Network, Wynnwood, PA, www.creationcare.org (Also look for other resources on this site.)
- *Creation Stewardship and the Christian Camp*, by Sterling Edwards, Spruce Lake Outdoor School, Canadensis, PA, 2001; (570) 595-7505
- *Developing a Creation Friendly Camp* by Sterling Edwards, Spruce Lake Outdoor School, Canadensis, PA, 2001; (570) 595-7505
- *Let the Earth Be Glad: A Starter Kit for Evangelical Churches to Care for God's Creation*, Evangelical Environmental Network, Wynnwood, PA. (800) 650-6600
- *Rejoicing With Creation: A Camp Counselor's Manual for Leaders of Older Elementary Children*, by Tom Malone (John Knox Press, 1979)
- *In His Hands: 366 Inspirational Messages from Nature*, by James and Priscilla Tucker (Institute of Outdoor Ministry, Inc., 1999). www.outdoormin.org



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