

THE BENEFITS OF
COMMUNION WITH GOD IN NATURE

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INTRODUCTION

The Benefits of Communion with God in Nature

Research Goals

In today's society, we spend an ever-increasing amount of time indoors, living in an artificial world of human making. Ours is a world of tightly sealed vehicles on busy streets, air conditioned offices, and homes often crowded together in neighborhoods. In our sophisticated society, much of our work is done indoors, away from the sun and the elements of nature. Children study and learn in classrooms that look much like the offices, shops or industries their parents work in. The sick are whisked away to hospitals, where they are shut away from the light of day and treated with the latest drugs in the hopes that they will recover.

Our leisure time, too, is spent indoors, consuming an artificial diet of high-tech recreation, streamed through digital superhighways into every corner of our lives. Without leaving the comfort of our living rooms, we can travel the world through social media, or escape to worlds of movies, entertainment, gaming, and virtual reality. In fact, with the ubiquitous smartphone, the lines have blurred between office, home, and recreation to the point that every place is no place at all!

With the advent of COVID-19, work, school, and recreation all happen in the same places that we live, eat, and sleep. Even the daily commute—a chore yet a welcome boundary between the areas of our lives—has become a thing of the past. Along with these changes, our ability to gather together in communities of faith for corporate worship has been limited. Live streamed services and video conferencing from home have replaced the gatherings in sacred spaces.

Families sleep, eat, work, learn, and worship in the same space with little incentive to leave the indoors.

How is this shift to indoor living affecting our spiritual lives? Are there hidden benefits that have been lost by living our lives indoors? In this paper, we will look at the role that spending time in the natural world can play in our physical and spiritual well-being. We will discuss the benefits of communion with God in nature, and identify ways in which we can commune and connect with God by spending time in His creation. Finally, we will discuss some dangers and pitfalls to avoid while studying the creator through the lens of His creation.

While addressing aspects of spirituality from a variety of religions, this article will focus on spirituality primarily from a protestant Christian perspective, and will include sources particularly relevant within the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Christian denomination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This year, with so many people “locked in” due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increased interest in the concept and benefits of getting outdoors. An ancient Norwegian cultural tradition known as *friluftsliv* roughly translates to “outdoor living.” It is “a commitment to celebrating time outdoors, no matter the weather forecast.”¹ In fact, in Norway the law of *allemannsrett* encourages *friluftsliv* by recognizing the right of access for anyone to walk or ski on uncultivated land in the countryside, regardless of who owns it. Perhaps it’s not surprising that Finland is also ranked as the happiest country in the world!²

¹Smith, Jen Rose. “What is 'friluftsliv'? How an idea of outdoor living could help us this winter” *National Geographic* (September 11, 2020) <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/2020/09/how-norways-friluftsliv-could-help-us-through-a-coronavirus-winter>.

²Helliwell, John F., Richard Layard, Jeffrey Sachs, and Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, eds. 2020. *World Happiness Report 2020*. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network. <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2020/>.

Spending time in natural environments can have a positive benefit to health and well being.³ The Japanese practice of Shinrin-Yoku, or “Forest Bathing,” has been demonstrated through numerous studies to promote health, particularly by combating modern-day stress introduced by our fast-paced and high-tech lifestyles.⁴ Forest Bathing doesn’t require elaborate equipment, long journeys or even strenuous exercise. It simply involves being in nature, and connecting with nature through our senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch.⁵ In one fascinating study, subjects walked and viewed a forest one day, and then walked and viewed an urban environment the next day. Before and after measurements were taken of various measures of stress such as cortisol levels, blood pressure, pulse rate and heart regularity. “The results show that forest environments promote lower concentrations of cortisol, lower pulse rate, lower blood pressure, greater parasympathetic nerve activity, and lower sympathetic nerve activity than do city environments.”⁶

But, what mechanism is responsible for these positive health effects of getting out in nature? Recent research has demonstrated that a person’s spirituality may provide one such connection.⁷ Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) identify God as Creator of the natural world. Hence, God is separate from and above His creation, and humans form a separate and special part of His creation.⁸ Therefore we can learn something of the deity by

³White, M.P., Alcock, I., Grellier, J. et al. “Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing.” *Sci Rep* 9, 7730 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-44097-3>.

⁴Hansen, Margaret M., Reo Jones, and Kirsten Tocchini. “Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing) and Nature Therapy: A State-of-the-Art Review.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (July 28, 2017). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14080851>

⁵Li, Qing. *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness*. New York, NY: Viking, 2018. Excerpt reprinted in *Time Magazine* May 1, 2018. <https://time.com/5259602/japanese-forest-bathing/>.

⁶Park, Bum Jin. et al “The Physiological Effects of Shinrin-Yoku (Taking in the Forest Atmosphere or Forest Bathing): Evidence from Field Experiments in 24 Forests across Japan.” *Environmental Health & Preventative Medicine* 15, no. 1 (2010). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19568835/>.

⁷Kamitsis, Ilias, and Andrew J.p. Francis. “Spirituality Mediates the Relationship between Engagement with Nature and Psychological Wellbeing.” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 36 (2013): 136–143.

⁸Vess, Matthew, Jamie Arndt, and Cathy R. Cox. “Faith and Nature: The Effect of Death-Relevant Cognitions on the Relationship Between Religious Fundamentalism and Connectedness to Nature.” *Social Psychological and*

studying His handiwork. Other religions such as Hinduism or New Age religions focus on nature itself as deity, or enshrining the deity present in all things.^{9 10 11} Hence, connection with the natural world, rather than simply aiding and informing spiritual practice, becomes a central spiritual practice in and of itself.

Spiritual Benefits of Spending Time Outdoors

No sincere Christian would doubt the importance of spending time in prayer or the study of the Bible. But the place dedicated to such devotions is not emphasized nearly so often. No doubt, nearly any place *can* be a place for prayer or meditation upon God's word^{12 13}—even the belly of a whale, if need be!¹⁴ But certainly, some places could be more conducive to meditation, and the search for such a place is the focus of this discussion.

For the Christian believer, there is much precedent for communion with God in nature. Adam and Eve communed with God in the garden of Eden.¹⁵ When Eleazar returned to Abraham's household with Rebekah, Isaac was out in the fields meditating—apparently something he did on a regular basis.¹⁶ Moses spent many years in the wilderness, where he learned to hear God's voice. He personally encountered God in the desert at the burning bush,¹⁷ and it was in this same wilderness that God taught the children of Israel to follow His law.¹⁸

Personality Science 3, no. 3 (2011): 333–340.

⁹Sharma, Suresh K., and Usha Sharma. *Cultural and Religious Heritage of India: Hinduism*. New Delhi, India: Mittal Publications, 2004: 301.

¹⁰Groothuis, Douglas R. *Unmasking the New Age*. Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity, 1991.

¹¹Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998.

¹²Psalm 139:7-12

¹³Nehemiah 2:4-5

¹⁴Jonah 2:1-2

¹⁵Genesis 3:8

¹⁶Genesis 24:63

¹⁷Exodus 3:1-4

¹⁸Deuteronomy 29:5

John the Baptist lived and preached in the wilderness¹⁹, where the objects of God's creation became his second lesson book to discover the character of God's love.^{20 21} Jesus himself often sought communion with God in the wilderness. It was here that Satan found Him and sought to overcome Him with his masterful temptations.²²

Jesus and his disciples sought rest in deserted places, and it was in these same outdoors venues that the multitudes gathered to hear His teachings.²³ When Jesus ordained the twelve disciples and send them out to preach, he chose the simple surroundings of a mountainside over the magnificent edifices of Jerusalem for this sacred task.²⁴ In her commentary on this event, Mrs. White writes: "Jesus loved the scenes of nature. To Him each quiet retreat was a sacred temple."²⁵

It was not by accident, nor entirely out of necessity, that Jesus delivered His greatest teachings in the open air. From the tenor and content of His teachings, it is clear that He intentionally used the object lessons of nature to teach His greatest truths.

Jesus' longest sermon recorded in Scripture is the Sermon on the Mount. Not only was this given in the outdoors, but it is filled with references to the natural world: salt, light, birds, lilies, sheep, wolves, trees with fruit, thorn bushes, and the rock and sand foundations weathering the wind and storm.²⁶ If Jesus, the Master Teacher, relied so heavily on the natural world to illustrate eternal truths, wouldn't it stand to reason that He can still use this natural world to teach us today?

¹⁹Matthew 3:3

²⁰White, E. G. "A Lesson from One of God's Prophets." *The Youth's Instructor* January 7, 1897.

²¹White, E. G. *Testimonies for the Church* 8: 331.

²²Matthew 4:1

²³Mark 6:31-33

²⁴Mark 3

²⁵White, E. G. *Desire of Ages*: 290.

²⁶Mathew 5-7

The Scripture is clear that the natural world does teach us of the things of God. Speaking of the Gentile world, who have no special revelation through Scripture, Paul writes:

“What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead.”²⁷

The beauty and complexity of creation testifies of the hand of an omnipotent and loving creator. Job asks the rhetorical question:

“But now ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
And the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
Or speak to the earth, and it will teach you;
And the fish of the sea will explain to you.
Who among all these does not know
That the hand of the LORD has done this,
In whose hand is the life of every living thing,
And the breath of all mankind?”²⁸

The Psalmist David sings:

“The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech,
And night unto night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech nor language

²⁷Romans 1:19-20

²⁸Job 12:7-10

Where their voice is not heard.”²⁹

So the visible natural world teaches us about the invisible Creator God. It teaches us of His power, it points to Him as creator, and reveals His glory. But more than teaching and informing, being in nature has a powerful influence toward releasing stress, refreshing our hearts and restoring us both physically and spiritually. The elements of nature move in consistent rhythms—always beautiful, ever changing, but ever in their appointed course. The day and night, the change of the season, the growth and changes of plants and animals, help to regulate the rhythms of our own lives. This has been scientifically demonstrated to reduce oxidative stress³⁰ (a primary contribute to the aging process). Would it not stand to reason that the same rhythms of nature can bring our hearts into the spirit of worship with our creator? This is alluded to in the familiar words of the 23rd Psalm: “He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul...”

The weekly Sabbath, established at creation and embedded in God’s moral law, creates a special bond, not only between us and our Creator, but also with the rest of creation. The Sabbath command obligates us to allow for rest, not only for our fellow humans, but even for animals.³¹ The Sabbath is not merely a time of prayer and meditation—certainly Jesus taught the importance of doing good on the Sabbath. Because we are forbidden to work in our daily toil on the Sabbath, it provides a perfect opportunity for connecting with God by spending time with our families in His creation. Speaking of the Sabbath, Ellen G. White writes: “God designs that the Sabbath shall direct the minds of men to the contemplation of His created works.”³² The

²⁹Psalm 19:1-3

³⁰Wilking, Melissa, Mary Ndiaye, Hasan Mukhtar, and Nihal Ahmad. “Circadian Rhythm Connections to Oxidative Stress: Implications for Human Health.” *Antioxidants & Redox Signaling* 19, no. 2 (2013): 192–208.

³¹Exodus 20:8-11

³²White, E. G. *Patriarchs and Prophets*: 48

believers in Philippi had a beautiful tradition of leaving the city and meeting for prayer outdoors, by a river side, on the Sabbath day.³³

One of the most important benefits of communion with God in nature, is that nature itself can teach us to pray and praise the Lord. The Psalmist writes: “Let heaven and earth praise Him, The seas and everything that moves in them.”³⁴ The creation itself praises the Lord, and as we commune with God through His creation, we can blend our voices with the songs of His other created things, multiplying the power of our praise and worship to God!

How to Commune with God in Nature

With so many spiritual benefits from communion with God in nature, what are some ways we can gain these benefits? Do we have to wait until we can take an exotic vacation to some remote forest lake, or can we find benefits near our homes, even in a suburban neighborhood or a city apartment? Are there special meditation practices that we must learn? Is it better alone, or with others?

The first principle is *regularity*, more specifically *daily*. Jesus taught His disciples to pray for “daily bread.”³⁵ Daniel prayed three times daily from his open window.³⁶ The once-in-a-lifetime getaway may be nice, but communion with God, for the Christian, must be a daily practice, and like Jesus,³⁷ as often as possible *in nature*.

How do we commune with God in nature? Examples we have already referenced include corporate worship and prayer in nature (the Philippian believers), Jesus’ teaching in nature, and searching for object lessons in nature (as in the case of Jesus’ parables and teachings). One of the

³³Acts 16:13

³⁴Psalm 69:34

³⁵Matthew 6:11

³⁶Daniel 6:11

³⁷White, E. G. *The Youth's Instructor*, December 5, 1895.

most powerful and practical ideas is to take our daily prayer time outdoors—just as Jesus did. With a bit of searching, one can find a secluded place where time can be spent in prayer, away from the distractions of home or work.

What should such a place look like? It doesn't have to be far from home—in fact, a place close by and easily accessible is preferable, in order to come regularly for prayer. Ideally, it should be a quiet place—as free as possible from noise, from people, from distractions. The places that Jesus sought for prayer were “away from the thoroughfares of travel, and the bustle and agitation of the city.”³⁸

Ideally such a place would be in a country setting, but a quiet garden or even a safe but secluded spot in a public park could form a perfect sanctuary in nature for prayer. If none of these are options, even bringing a bit of nature indoors—forming a nature sanctuary with houseplants—can be beneficial.³⁹

Being “away from the bustle and agitation of the city” is key to connecting with God through nature. Whether the nature sanctuary is (ideally) far from the city, or whether it comprises a small oasis of nature in an urban environment, it is imperative that it be as free as possible from distractions. Digitally disconnect—leave cell phones and digital devices behind, or put them in “airplane mode” and silence notifications. Leave the headphones behind and let the sounds of nature sooth the spirit. Breathe the fresh air, and let the peace of God fill the troubled soul!

Besides prayer, studying God's word in nature, studying the mysteries of the natural world itself, or just quietly contemplating His presence are all beneficial means of communion with God in nature.

³⁸White, E. G. *The Desire of Ages*: 361

³⁹Loki, Reynard. “12 Healing Houseplants.” *Spirit of Change Magazine*. (December 5, 2017). <https://www.spiritofchange.org/12-healing-houseplants/>

The Limitations of Nature

Despite the wonderful benefits, there are certainly limitations when it comes to communion with God through nature. Although God has revealed His character through His creation, that picture of Himself has been marred by sin.⁴⁰ Without careful study of His special revelation through His Word, we can easily reach wrong conclusions about His character by simply studying nature.

Philosophical schools of thought such as naturalism⁴¹ focus exclusively on the study of the physical, natural world, and deny the existence of the supernatural. Darwin's theory of evolution provides an explanation for the existence of the natural world without appeal to the supernatural events of creation. Hence the natural world becomes its own creator, through processes of evolution, and the only object worthy of consideration or accolades.

Naturalism embraces the study of the natural world while rejecting spirituality outright. On the other hand, the philosophy of transcendentalism embraces spirituality wholeheartedly.⁴² Transcendentalism avoids religious institutions and instead teaches its adherents to find God within one's self through intuition and the study of the natural environment. This 19th century movement, originally split off from Unitarianism, included philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—men who dedicated their lives to connecting with God in nature. Transcendentalism draws heavily from the Indian religion of Hinduism, teaching that God is in

⁴⁰White, E. G. *Healthful Living*: 297 – 298

⁴¹Papineau, David. "Naturalism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/naturalism/>

⁴²"The Grapes of Wrath Quotes: Naturalism & Transcendentalism." Study.com. November 30, 2016. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-grapes-of-wrath-quotes-naturalism-transcendentalism.html>.

everything in nature. Thoreau suggested “that spending time in nature was the closest man could come to the divine.”⁴³

This same philosophy of finding God in nature appeared in the works of one of the great pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Movement, John Harvey Kellogg. In his book, *The Living Temple*, he interwove this mystical philosophy, that God is in all, into the Seventh-day Adventist message of health reform. This pantheistic teaching (more properly pantheism, in his case) ultimately led to his separation from the Seventh-day Adventist church entirely.⁴⁴

Today, many elements of Eastern mysticism still make inroads into Christian beliefs. A recent study published by Pew Research highlights the fact that, while eight-in-ten Christians believe in God as described in the Bible, six-in-ten believe one or more of four New Age beliefs identified in the study. These include belief in reincarnation, astrology, psychics, and the presence of spiritual energy in physical objects like mountains or trees.⁴⁵

Thus it is important, when speaking of or practicing “communion with God in nature,” that we recognize as Christians that God is separate from and entirely above His creation—that the created work can, at best, reflect His character and put us in tune with His Holy Spirit, but should never become the object or medium of our worship. Otherwise, we risk becoming like the heathen whom Paul describes, “who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.”⁴⁶

⁴³Khan Academy. Transcendentalism (article) in *Culture and reform in the early nineteenth century*. Retrieved November 09, 2020, from <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-early-republic/culture-and-reform/a/transcendentalism>

⁴⁴Loignon, Austin Eli. “Cornflakes, God, and Circumcision: John Harvey Kellogg and Transatlantic Health Reform,” 2019. <https://rc.library.uta.edu/uta-ir/bitstream/handle/10106/29174/LOIGNON-DISSERTATION-2019.pdf>.

⁴⁵Gecewicz, Claire. “‘New Age’ Beliefs Common among Both Religious and Nonreligious Americans.” (October 1, 2018). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/>.

⁴⁶Romans 1:25

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In my own experience, I have found great benefit in the practice of spiritual communion with God in nature. In my work, I find a great deal of my time is spent indoors, in front of a computer screen, or on the road or meeting with people in potentially stressful situations. Even Bible study often involves using technology and takes place in the same spaces as other work. One of the easiest and most effective ways of finding that much-needed “reset” is to simply take a walk out on the woods near our home. Through the time outdoors, I am able to commune with God in prayer in ways that are difficult to do when surrounded by the distractions of the home office. Even the every-present mobile phone, with its ceaseless notifications, becomes strangely quiet when I reach the wooded valleys without cell-phone reception. Here, away from the noise and distractions, I find a peace with God that is difficult to experience in the hurried pace of life.

With the advent of COVID-19, this special time outdoors became the inspiration to move my pulpit outside. The cell phone camera became my congregation, and there alone in the woods I began to pour out my heart, piece by piece, in the messages God moved me to share with my congregations who were home-bound. I would come back to my home-office and upload the videos for my church members to watch—opening a new door to ministry through “Sermons in the Woods.”

But even still, the quiet time alone in the woods with God continues to be a lifeline of spiritual strength during the difficult days of COVID ministry.

SUMMARY

We have documented the clear connection between spending time in nature and the physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits of reduced stress and clearer thinking. We have discovered the many spiritual benefits of spending time outdoors, and discussed practical ways that virtually anyone can discover these benefits on a daily basis, even if they may not live far out in the country. We've talked about the dangers of mysticism—of worshiping nature or ourselves instead of nature's creator. Finally, I shared from my personal experience the benefits I've realized from spending time in nature.

Suggestions for Further Research

While there is much documentation about the physiological benefits of spending time in nature, and also documentation of the benefits of Eastern meditation, there seems to be a lack of empirical studies in the area of spiritual benefits derived from Christian practices in nature. It would be fascinating to conduct more research and study in this connection and benefits. In what ways could corporate worship experiences draw from the example of Christ's teaching in nature? Would there be advantages in incorporating more object lessons into Christian teaching? How can the Christian religion be grounded more thoroughly in a study of nature and science, and could such teaching methods combat the increasing prevalence of evolutionary thought within the Christian church? In what ways can Christians embrace Biblical meditation and prayer, especially outdoors in nature, or by using a natural setting in an urban environment, without falling pray to the deceptions of Eastern meditation and mystical practices?

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APPENDIX I

Select Quotations from the Writings of Ellen G. White

The Importance of Coming Apart for Communion with God

Christ's words of compassion are spoken to His workers today just as surely as they were spoken to His disciples. "Come ye yourselves apart, ... and rest awhile," He says to those who are worn and weary. It is not wise to be always under the strain of work and excitement, even in ministering to men's spiritual needs; for in this way personal piety is neglected, and the powers of mind and soul and body are overtaxed. Self-denial is required of the disciples of Christ, and sacrifices must be made; but care must also be exercised lest through their overzeal Satan take advantage of the weakness of humanity, and the work of God be marred.

In the estimation of the rabbis it was the sum of religion to be always in a bustle of activity. They depended upon some outward performance to show their superior piety. Thus they separated their souls from God, and built themselves up in self-sufficiency. The same dangers still exist. As activity increases and men become successful in doing any work for God, there is danger of trusting to human plans and methods. There is a tendency to pray less, and to have less faith. Like the disciples, we are in danger of losing sight of our dependence on God, and seeking to make a savior of our activity. We need to look constantly to Jesus, realizing that it is His power which does the work. While we are to labor earnestly for the salvation of the lost, we must also take time for meditation, for prayer, and for the study of the word of God. Only the work accomplished with much prayer, and sanctified by the merit of Christ, will in the end prove to have been efficient for good.

No other life was ever so crowded with labor and responsibility as was that of Jesus; yet how often He was found in prayer! How constant was His communion with God! Again and again in the history of His earthly life are found records such as these: "Rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed." "Great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by Him of their infirmities. And He withdrew Himself into the wilderness, and prayed." "And it came to pass in those days, that He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." Mark 1:35; Luke 5:15, 16; 6:12.

In a life wholly devoted to the good of others, the Saviour found it necessary to withdraw from the thoroughfares of travel and from the throng that followed Him day after day. He must turn aside from a life of ceaseless activity and contact with human needs, to seek retirement and unbroken communion with His Father. As one with us, a sharer in our needs and weaknesses, He was wholly dependent upon God, and in the secret place of prayer He sought divine strength, that He might go forth braced for duty and trial. In a world of sin Jesus endured struggles and torture of soul. In communion with God He could unburden the sorrows that were crushing Him. Here He found comfort and joy.

Desire of Ages p. 362

The Sabbath Directs Our Minds to God's Creation

God designs that the Sabbath shall direct the minds of men to the contemplation of His created works. Nature speaks to their senses, declaring that there is a living God, the Creator, the Supreme Ruler of all. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth His handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge." Psalm 19:1, 2. The beauty that clothes the earth is a token of God's love. We may behold it in the everlasting hills, in the lofty trees, in the opening buds and the delicate flowers. All speak to us of God. The Sabbath, ever pointing to Him who made them all, bids men open the great book of nature and trace therein the wisdom, the power, and the love of the Creator.

Patriarchs and Prophets p. 48

How Jesus Communed with God in Nature

Whenever He could, He [Jesus] went out alone into the fields and on the mountainsides to commune with the God of nature. When His work was done, He wandered by the lakeside, among the trees of the forest, and in the green valleys where He could think about God and lift His soul to heaven in prayer. After a season thus spent, He would return to His home to take up again the humble duties of His life and to give to all an example of patient labor.

*Youth's Instructor, December 5, 1895
From the Heart, p. 236*

Nature Speaks to it's Creator, but Imperfectly

It is impossible to gain a perfect knowledge of God from nature, for nature itself is imperfect. A curse, a blight, is upon it. Yet the things of nature, marred as they are by the blight of sin, inculcate truths regarding the skilful Master Artist. One omnipotent Power, great in goodness, in mercy, and in love, has created the earth, and even in its blighted state much that is beautiful remains. Nature's voice speaks, saying that there is a God back of nature, but it does not, in its imperfections, represent God. Nature cannot reveal the character of God in his moral perfection.

*Unpublished Testimonies, July 3, 1898.
Healthful Living, p. 296*

Traces of Primal Loveliness

In the varied scenes of nature also are lessons of divine wisdom for all who have learned to commune with God. The pages that opened in undimmed brightness to the gaze of the first pair in Eden, bear now a shadow. A blight has fallen upon the fair creation. And yet, wherever we turn are traces of primal loveliness. Wherever we may turn, we hear the voice of God, and behold his handiwork.

From the solemn roll of the deep-toned thunder and old ocean's ceaseless roll, to the glad songs that make the forests vocal with melody, nature's ten thousand voices speak his praise. In earth and air and sky, with their marvelous tint and color, varying in gorgeous contrast or softly blended in harmony, we behold his glory. The everlasting hills tell us of his power. The trees wave their green banners in the sunlight, and point us upward to their creator. The flowers that gem the earth with their beauty, whisper to us of Eden, and fill us with longings for its unfading loveliness. The living green that carpets the brown earth, tells us of God's care for the humblest of his creatures. The caves of the sea and the depths of the earth reveal his treasures. He who placed the pearls in the ocean, and the amethyst and chrysolite among the rocks, is a lover of the beautiful. The sun rising in the heavens is the representative of him who is the life and light of all that he has made. All the brightness and beauty that adorn the earth and light up the heavens, speak of God.

Healthful Living, p. 297 – 298

Nature a Sacred Temple

And He goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto Him whom He would: and they came unto Him. And He ordained twelve, that they should be with Him, and that He might send them forth to preach." Mark 3:13-14

It was beneath the sheltering trees of the mountainside, but a little distance from the Sea of Galilee, that the twelve were called to the apostolate, and the Sermon on the Mount was given. The fields and hills were the favorite resorts of Jesus, and much of His teaching was given under the open sky, rather than in the temple or the synagogues. No synagogue could have received the throngs that followed Him; but not for this reason only did He choose to teach in the fields and groves. Jesus loved the scenes of nature. To Him each quiet retreat was a sacred temple.

It was under the trees of Eden that the first dwellers on earth had chosen their sanctuary. There Christ had communed with the father of mankind. When banished from Paradise, our first parents still worshiped in the fields and groves, and there Christ met them with the gospel of His grace. It was Christ who spoke with Abraham under the oaks at Mamre; with Isaac as he went out to pray in the fields at the eventide; with Jacob on the hillside at Bethel; with Moses among the mountains of Midian; and with the boy David as he watched his flocks. It was at Christ's direction that for fifteen centuries the Hebrew people had left their homes for one week every year, and had dwelt in booths formed from the green branches "of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook." Leviticus 23:40.

In training His disciples, Jesus chose to withdraw from the confusion of the city to the quiet of the fields and hills, as more in harmony with the lessons of self-abnegation He desired to teach them. And during His ministry He loved to gather the people about Him under the blue heavens, on some grassy hillside, or on the beach beside the lake. Here, surrounded by the works of His own creation, He could turn the thoughts of His hearers from the artificial to the natural. In the growth and development of nature were revealed the principles of His kingdom. As men should lift up their eyes to the hills of God, and behold the wonderful works of His hands, they could learn precious lessons of divine truth. Christ's teaching would be repeated to them in the

things of nature. So it is with all who go into the fields with Christ in their hearts. They will feel themselves surrounded with a holy influence. The things of nature take up the parables of our Lord, and repeat His counsels. By communion with God in nature, the mind is uplifted, and the heart finds rest.

Desire of Ages p. 290-291

Natural Things a Medium for Spiritual

The Scripture says, "All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; ... that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world." Matthew 13:34, 35. Natural things were the medium for the spiritual; the things of nature and the life-experience of His hearers were connected with the truths of the written word. Leading thus from the natural to the spiritual kingdom, Christ's parables are links in the chain of truth that unites man with God, and earth with heaven.

In His teaching from nature, Christ was speaking of the things which His own hands had made, and which had qualities and powers that He Himself had imparted. In their original perfection all created things were an expression of the thought of God. To Adam and Eve in their Eden home nature was full of the knowledge of God, teeming with divine instruction. Wisdom spoke to the eye and was received into the heart; for they communed with God in His created works. As soon as the holy pair transgressed the law of the Most High, the brightness from the face of God departed from the face of nature. The earth is now marred and defiled by sin. Yet even in its blighted state much that is beautiful remains. God's object lessons are not obliterated; rightly understood, nature speaks of her Creator.

Christ's Object Lessons, p. 17-18

Jesus' Moral Powers Strengthened by Meditation

The life of Christ was humble, free from affectation or display. He lived mostly in the open air, drinking the pure water of the mountain streams. He passed up and down the steep mountain paths to his life of toil, and to his humble home, for rest and refreshment. He was delighted with the happy songsters, who caroled forth, in their varied notes, praise to their Creator. The birds, the natural flowers that decked the fields with their glowing beauty, the majestic trees and lofty mountains, the ragged rocks and perpetual hills, all had special charms for him. The sun, moon, and stars, the reflecting glory of the evening sunset, were also objects of his contemplation. He gathered knowledge from his Heavenly Father's library of animate and inanimate nature. The olive groves were his sanctuary for prayer. There, secluded from every human eye, he communed with his Heavenly Father. His moral powers were strengthened by his meditation and communion with God.

Youth's Instructor, September 1, 1873

John the Baptist Communed with God through Nature

And John [the Baptist] was not indolent. He was thus secluded from the world that he might secure a sound education from God's written word and the great book of nature. The mountains and perpetual hills, the ever-flowing brooks, were company for him. Through them he communed with God. Everything that surrounded him in his mountain home was to him a book of instruction, containing lessons of deepest importance in regard to the character, the benevolence, and the love of God.

Youth's Instructor, January 7, 1897

Revelations of God in Nature

John the Baptist in his desert life was taught of God. He studied the revelations of God in nature. Under the guiding of the divine Spirit, he studied the scrolls of the prophets. By day and by night, Christ was his study, his meditation, until mind and heart and soul were filled with the glorious vision.

Communion with God, p. 123

Need to Commune

Like Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, like David among the hills of Judea, or Elijah by the brook Cherith, the disciples needed to come apart from the scenes of their busy activity, to commune with Christ, with nature, and with their own hearts.

Desire of Ages, p. 360

Away from the Bustle

Near Bethsaida, at the northern end of the lake, was a lonely region, now beautiful with the fresh green of spring, that offered a welcome retreat to Jesus and His disciples. For this place they set out, going in their boat across the water. Here they would be away from the thoroughfares of travel, and the bustle and agitation of the city. The scenes of nature were in themselves a rest, a change grateful to the senses. Here they could listen to the words of Christ without hearing the angry interruptions, the retorts and accusations of the scribes and Pharisees. Here they could enjoy a short season of precious fellowship in the society of their Lord.

Desire of Ages, p. 361

Shut Away; Desolate but Not Gloomy

Patmos, a barren rocky island in the Aegean Sea, had been chosen by the Roman government as a place of banishment for criminals. But to the servant of God [John] this gloomy abode proved to be the gate of heaven. He was shut away from the busy scenes of life and from active labor as an evangelist, but he was not excluded from the presence of God. In his desolate home he could commune with the King of kings and study more closely the manifestations of divine power in the book of nature and the pages of inspiration. He delighted to meditate upon the great work of creation and to adore the power of the Divine Architect. In former years his eyes had been greeted with the sight of wood-covered hills, green valleys, and fruitful plains; and in all the beauties of nature he had delighted to trace the wisdom and skill of the Creator. He was

now surrounded with scenes that to many would appear gloomy and uninteresting. But to John it was otherwise. He could read the most important lessons in the wild, desolate rocks, the mysteries of the great deep, and the glories of the firmament. To him all bore the impress of God's power and declared His glory.

The Sanctified Life, p. 72

The Mind Strengthened by Reading God's Attributes in Nature

In the life of Christ, his childhood and youth, there is a lesson for the youth of today. Christ is our example, and in youth we should contemplate God in nature,—study his character in the work of his hands. The mind is strengthened by becoming acquainted with God, by reading his attributes in the things which he has made. As we behold the beauty and grandeur in the works of nature, our affections go out after God; and though our souls are awed and our spirit subdued, our souls are invigorated by coming in contact with the Infinite through his marvelous works. Communion with God, through humble prayer, develops and strengthens the mental and moral faculties, and spiritual powers increase by cultivating thoughts upon spiritual things. We should carefully study the word of God, that we may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works, and be armed with arguments wherewith to resist the evil one. Like Christ, we should be able to meet the enemy in time of temptation with, "It is written." O that it might be said of our youth as it was said of Jesus, that they increase "in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man."

Youth's Instructor, July 13, 1893