

Nature as a Source of Health



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 1:27–2:25; Genesis 3; Jer. 10:12, 13; Ps. 19:1–7; Matt. 6:25–34; Psalm 104.*

Memory Text: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge” (*Psalm 19:1, 2, NIV*).

God created Adam and Eve in His own image. What could be a more perfect inheritance? He then placed them in the Garden of Eden. What could be a more perfect setting? Both heredity and environment, then, were divinely balanced to produce and preserve perfect mental and physical health.

Sin, however, ruined everything—and, by the second generation, jealousy, hatred, and violence contaminated the world. The natural environment also underwent the initial results of sin, and when sin became intolerable, the Flood changed forever the portrait of the earth.

Yet, much goodness and beauty remain in the natural world. Nature still supplies sufficient resources to satisfy our basic needs. Nature also can provide joy, happiness, and well-being to compensate partially for the misery caused by sin.

Thus, despite its sometimes violent and deadly convulsions, nature can be a source of mental and physical health. It also can become a means for us to draw ever closer to the Creator, the fount of all goodness: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights” (*James 1:17*).

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 19.*

A Perfect Environment

Today, living as we do in a world tainted and corrupted by sin, we can only imagine what it must have been like for our first parents in Eden. No sin, no suffering, no death—nothing to bring them the kind of sorrows and pain that we all know so well. In a sense, we're so used to these realities, they're so common, that we forget that they all are intruders, things that were not in the original creation, things that were never meant to be, things that we are promised will one day be forever gone.

Read Genesis 1:27–2:25. What picture is presented about what life and the environment were like in Eden? How different is it from what we know today?

The newly created couple was placed in a garden that God Himself had planted (*Gen. 2:8*). Although the biblical account is brief, imagine when we consider the wonderful bounties nature provides for us today, the luxurious mix of produce that must have come from this, the first garden. Their senses were exposed to sights, sounds, tastes, feelings, and aromas that certainly brought much satisfaction and well-being to our first parents. It truly was Paradise.

There is no doubt that the environment was the best to suit the newly created humans. Their physical, emotional, and mental needs were more than met. Mental states such as uncertainty, anxiety, and worry were completely unknown, because there was nothing there to cause them.

“The Creator chose for our first parents the surroundings best adapted for their health and happiness. He did not place them in a palace or surround them with the artificial adornments and luxuries that so many today are struggling to obtain. . . . In the garden that God prepared as a home for His children, graceful shrubs and delicate flowers greeted the eye at every turn. There were trees of every variety, many of them laden with fragrant and delicious fruit. On their branches the birds caroled their songs of praise. Under their shadow the creatures of the earth sported together without a fear.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 261.

Try to envision what Eden must have been like. Think of the sights, the smells, the tastes, everything designed to appeal to our senses. What should that tell us about how, in principle, our physical bodies are good and were made to be enjoyed by us?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Psalm 19:1, 2*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Outline the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of close contact with the natural world God created.

Feel: Cherish the beauty, order, power, and love of God as demonstrated in His works of creation.

Do: Commune with God in natural surroundings and use the natural remedies He offers.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Nature's Wealth

A What are the health benefits that God has provided in nature which we can appropriate only by being outside in His natural world?

B What are the spiritual benefits of worshiping in the garden, field, or woods?

C What are the mental benefits of study and close contact with the works of God's hands?

II. Feel: Invisible Made Visible

A How are the traits of God revealed in the works of His hands?

B Which of these demonstrations of His attributes are most valuable to you?

C How do you acknowledge your gratitude and appreciation to God for what He has made?

III. Do: Living With Nature

A How can we take better advantage of the benefits God has provided for our health in nature?

B How can we bring what we eat into closer conformity to God's original plan for our diet?

C How can we make our home environment more in harmony with our first home in Eden?

► **Summary:** In nature, our first home, God has provided healthful foods, a peaceful environment, natural remedies, and an ideal place for worship and communion with Him.

Sin and Nature

Whatever wonder and beauty we can find in nature, it is today a double-edged sword. Beauty and marvel are there, but so are famine, earthquakes, pestilence, and disease. Something has gone terribly wrong.

Read over Genesis 3, the Fall. What immediate changes came to both humans and nature as a result of sin?

Sin brought immediate physical and spiritual consequences to human life. Nature, too, suffered the effects of sin. Sin caused devastating effects upon Creation in at least three ways:

- The ground was cursed (*Gen. 3:17*). After departing from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve encountered immediate obstacles in working the soil. The ground began to produce undesirable thorns and thistles. Pests, most probably, got in the way of healthy growth too. Things got worse after the devastation of the Flood.
- Human beings experienced significant changes. Fatigue and pain became a reality. The relationship between the man and the woman changed. The chapter seems to imply that Eve would have originally not had pain in childbirth. The relationship of Adam to the earth had changed, as well, and work now was going to be much more difficult than it would have been before. We do not know how the awareness of their own impending deaths affected the first couple, but it must have changed their outlook on life completely.
- Sin affected human and animal behavior. Hatred, jealousy, selfishness, arrogance, etc., caused aggression against fellow humans and animals. Other unknown ways of damaging the environment (perhaps comparable to what we are witnessing today) may have taken place. Animals started to kill each other for food and for power. As described in Genesis 3–6, corruption and violence escalated to the point that God was grieved for having made all creatures (*Gen. 6:5–7*).

The true extent of all these transformations is not revealed to us, but we can assume that profound changes took place. Yet, God, in His infinite mercy, preserved a great deal of the magnificent original Creation for the benefit of human beings.

Look around at the wonders of nature wherever you are. What echoes of the original Creation seem to remain? What hope can you draw from those echoes that point you to the promises of a better world?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God created the world of nature to be the optimal environment for His creatures and to express His character. Sin has altered it, but nature still can help us to know God better and to help us achieve better physical and mental health.

The only universe in which intelligent life could come into being and thrive is a universe much like the one we occupy now. In fact, it is the universe we occupy now. So says what physicists and cosmologists call the Anthropic Principle.

According to this reasoning, there are an infinite number of universes that could have come into being if it had been left up to what Christian apologist Scott Hahn refers to as the “anti-deity” of the atheists, Chance. An incomprehensibly huge number of these possible universes would have been completely hostile to the existence of anything we would recognize as life, with an infinitesimally tiny number of them capable of becoming home to *any* form of life. The number capable of giving rise to intelligent life would be even smaller. Yet, somehow, here we are.

There are two possible ways of explaining this. Either our universe did come into being by chance and every universe that *can exist does* exist; we just happen to be in the one that allows us to exist. For many minds this explanation strains credulity.

The other alternative is that the universe was designed with us in mind, which just happens to be what the Bible has been telling us all along.

Discuss With the Class: How does it make you feel that God designed the universe with us in mind? Or do you believe that is true, that He actually did that?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. The Speech and Knowledge of the Stars (*Review Psalm 19:1, 2 with the class.*)

Most people would agree that the stars are pretty to look at. But for many

CONTINUED ►

God's Gifts Through Nature

The natural world presents a powerful testimony to not only the existence of God but also His power. Sadly, as Paul warned, humans (no doubt inspired by Satan) turned away from the living God and worshiped the creation instead of its Creator (*see Rom. 1:19–25*).

Read Jeremiah 10:12, 13. What picture is presented here of God's creative power and His present involvement in natural phenomena? What can we learn about the character of God through His created works?

Of course, as we all know, nature sometimes turns against us, spreading horror through earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, etc. Why these tragedies happen when and where they do are questions that we don't have answers for now. What we do know, however, is that the first few chapters in the book of Job reveal the reality of the great controversy between God and Satan and that Satan can use the forces of nature for evil purposes. And despite these terrible calamities, the goodness of God still can be seen in the natural world.

Read Psalm 19:1–6, and then in your own words paraphrase its basic message.

Nature traditionally has been seen by Seventh-day Adventists as God's second book. Observation and study of the natural world, if done in humility and openness to the influence of the Holy Spirit, will deepen faith and trust in God. It also will provide additional understanding into God's love for His creatures. This can be a great source of mental and spiritual comfort. Sometimes, when all else fails, the beauty of nature, and what it testifies to us about God, can be a source of great comfort and hope.

If while you are witnessing to someone about God's goodness (especially as revealed in nature) the person brings up the question of tsunamis, earthquakes, famines, and the like, how would you respond? What does the reality of these natural disasters tell us about the limits of what nature can teach us about God?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

peoples in ancient times, the stars were more than objects of beauty; they were gods. The civilizations of Mesopotamia—Chaldea, Babylon, and so on—developed an elaborate system that became what we now know as astrology to determine how these “gods” governed the destinies of individuals, nations, and peoples. This continues to this day. An iconic American president, it has been alleged, based some of his scheduling on the recommendations of an astrologer. Some people in India would no more release a new product or run for office without the benefit of an astrological chart than they would dispense with the advice of consultants or analysts.

In a way, it was, and is, not unnatural for people to think this way. We look up at the stars and see order: heavenly bodies moving in their courses with mathematical precision and certainty. Then we look around at the earth and see seeming chaos, but we know in our hearts that there must be order and meaning to it all. The heavens are as good a place as any to look.


But the psalmist urges us not to stop there but to look beyond at the source of that order. There is indeed knowledge to be found in the stars, but it is knowledge of the One who created the stars and set them in motion, the One who really holds the keys to the destinies of individuals, nations, and peoples.

Consider This: Some believe that God created the universe, set the laws by which it would be governed, and left it to its own devices. The God of the Bible, however, created the universe and natural laws but continues to involve Himself in the lives of His people. What does it mean to you that the God who set the stars in motion is intimately concerned with what concerns you? What does the order of the universe tell us about God’s will for our physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being?

II. Nature—Then and Now (Review Genesis 1:27–30, 3:17 with your class.)

Many people have tried to draw detailed prescriptions for the ideal human diet from this passage. Much has been made, for example, of the fact that God prescribes fruit and herbs bearing seed for human consumption, while allowing all green plants to other animals. Did our first parents follow a form of kosher veganism? We’ll never know, and it isn’t that important.

What is important, and what most commentators agree upon, is that our first parents—and God’s other creatures—*were* what we would now call vegans. They were able to sustain themselves without snuffing out the lives of any of God’s other creatures, including the plants they ate, which even today are somewhat self-regenerating. Even if one

CONTINUED 

Communion With God in Nature

“ ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin’ ” (*Matt. 6:28*).

A young man, an atheist his whole life, was converted in his early twenties. Right after his new birth, he lived for a number of months in a country setting, and he would often wander in the woods, marveling at the wonders of the God who had created such beauty. Of course, he had seen wonderful things in the natural world before, but only now was he able to see the character of the Lord who had created it all. It was, he said, “as if my eyes were opened for the first time in my whole life!” It was during that time that this new Christian came to truly know the Lord.

Read Matthew 6:25–34. What is Jesus telling us that we can learn from studying nature?

No question, we indeed can learn many valuable spiritual lessons from the study of the created world. But nature can work to our advantage spiritually in another way, as well. Luke 5:16 says that Jesus “withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed,” something that Ellen White said Jesus did often. Sometimes we, too, need to get away from everything and just be alone with the Lord in a natural environment. The beauty, the comfort, the peace, the serenity that one often finds in the natural world can speak to our hearts and minds in ways that nothing else does. There might not be any sudden revelation of new truth; there might be no new insights on a doctrine or a text. What there can be, instead, is an unspoken recognition of the love and power of the One who created all this. However we might individually experience the Lord this way, there’s no question that time alone in nature, in communion with God, can bring healing and peace to our bodies and souls.

“All who are under the training of God need the quiet hour for communion with their own hearts, with nature, and with God. In them is to be revealed a life that is not in harmony with the world, its customs, or its practices; and they need to have a personal experience in obtaining a knowledge of the will of God. We must individually hear Him speaking to the heart. When every other voice is hushed, and in quietness we wait before Him, the silence of the soul makes more distinct the voice of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 58.

When was the last time you communed with the Lord in nature? If possible, make an effort to do just that. You might be surprised at what a positive spiritual effect it will have.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

ate the leaves of a plant, the same plant would produce other leaves. In other words: no death, no exploitation, everything living in harmony with everything else, and no need for fighting or fleeing.

This also puts the concept of dominion—presented in verse 28—in an interesting light. Some commentators wonder why God didn’t allow the first humans a carnivorous diet, since He gave them dominion. Clearly, dominion as described here was not a relationship of exploiter and exploited. We really have little concept of what this entails, except that with the advent of sin it did “evolve” into an exploitative, sometimes predatory, relationship.

When sin was introduced into this harmony, it functioned in a way comparable to a computer virus or malware. At first, nature may have seemed to have gone on much the way it had. But the functions began to break down in certain ways. Dominion became naked exploitation of the weak by the strong. Death became part of the cycle of life and nourishment. The nature that God had created was recognizable but marred.

Consider This: In 1 Corinthians 15:47–50, Paul introduces the idea of Jesus Christ as the second Adam. What does this suggest about His role in restoring the harmony of creation destroyed by the first Adam? What, for example, does Christ’s sacrifice for us suggest about the true concept of dominion outlined in Genesis 1:28? (*See also Philippians 2:5–8.*)

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: Help your students to find and identify God’s presence and character reflected in nature and to see the ways in which God can and does communicate with us through the natural world.

Thought Questions:

- 1 What distinguishes reverence for the natural world as God’s creation from the sentimentality that many people have about nature (for example, the assumption that anything “natural” is good), or worship of nature, both of which seem to become more common and attractive the farther we’re removed from nature itself?
- 2 Why do you think Jesus used so many examples from the natural world in His parables? What was He saying about nature, particularly in

CONTINUED ►

Psalm 104

In the nineteenth century, a popular belief known as deism stated that God had created the world but then left it alone. In other words, according to this position, God exists but doesn't want to get involved.

That view, however, is not what the Bible teaches. God didn't just set the world like a wind-up watch and then let it go, come what may. According to the Bible, He's intricately involved in all that happens here. After all, what is the Cross if not God intimately and directly involved in human affairs?

Read Psalm 104 prayerfully. What does it tell us about the role of God in creation and in the natural world?

Perhaps the most telling thing about Psalm 104 is the enthusiasm and excitement that exude from the words themselves. The psalmist rejoices in the creative and sustaining power of the Lord. You almost can hear him shouting out these words in praise and adoration. He sees the reality of God in the everyday function of the natural world.

The God presented in this psalm is not the god of the deists either. He's a God who is involved in what happens here. No doubt, whatever the psalmist's personal troubles, he finds comfort and hope in the power of the Lord. Sure, contemplating the birds in their nests or the lions seeking their food isn't going to solve whatever daily struggles he's facing, but he can see in nature things that speak to him of God's goodness and power, and that gives him hope.

Nature also can be a source of healing to the body, mind, and spirit. In many cases fresh air, sunlight, water, and a healthy diet can do wonders for us both physically and mentally. Natural remedies remain a powerful means of health and healing.

Some doctors, too, often will tell people to get away from work and stress and find rest and relaxation in a natural setting somewhere. Some research shows just how good nature and a natural environment can be for us physically and mentally. After all, God put our first parents in a garden, not in a city square. Something in us resonates better with a field of lilies than it does with an asphalt parking lot.

Nature is one of God's great gifts. We should do all that we can to take advantage of it. What are ways you can benefit better from what God has given us in nature?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

contrast to the physical, mental, and spiritual environment humans had created for themselves? Look at Matthew 6:25–34, for example.

Application Questions:

- 1 There are two basic points of view on the question of humankind’s “dominion” over nature mentioned in Genesis 1:28. The first is that it justifies almost any use, or exploitation, of the natural world. Such views also tend to emphasize the impermanence of the present world, which is waiting for Jesus’ return. The second associates the concept with something that might better be called stewardship. Which do you agree with? In what way do you think the entrance of sin into the world changed the meaning of the word *dominion*?
- 2 How has nature helped you personally—or how do you think it can help you—to enjoy better physical or mental health?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: One of the effects of the modern way of life in many places is that it has caused us to become estranged from nature. Many of us know relatively little about the natural world in our own backyards. The following activity will help your students to learn a little about the natural phenomena in their immediate area, and possibly encourage them to take greater notice of the wonders right in front of them.

The week before this lesson is to be taught, encourage your students to find out facts about nature in their immediate area. What kinds of trees can be found in their yards or neighborhoods, for example? What are some of the nearby bodies of water? What plants and vegetables grow best in that particular climate and soil? Encourage class members to report what they have discovered.

Alternatively, a more hands-on approach might be to plant a garden (climate and seasons permitting) in pots or in a corner of the church property, as available. Grow from seed and watch the whole life cycle. This is, of course, a long-term class project.

Further Study: “The home of our first parents was to be a pattern for other homes as their children should go forth to occupy the earth. That home, beautified by the hand of God Himself, was not a gorgeous palace. Men, in their pride, delight in magnificent and costly edifices and glory in the works of their own hands; but God placed Adam in a garden. This was his dwelling. The blue heavens were its dome; the earth, with its delicate flowers and carpet of living green, was its floor; and the leafy branches of the goodly trees were its canopy. Its walls were hung with the most magnificent adornings—the handiwork of the great Master Artist. In the surroundings of the holy pair was a lesson for all time—that true happiness is found, not in the indulgence of pride and luxury, but in communion with God through His created works. If men would give less attention to the artificial, and would cultivate greater simplicity, they would come far nearer to answering the purpose of God in their creation.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 49, 50.

“The constant contact with the mystery of life and the loveliness of nature, as well as the tenderness called forth in ministering to these beautiful objects of God’s creation, tends to quicken the mind and refine and elevate the character.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 143.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How can we make sure that we don’t cross the line from being a lover of nature to a worshiper of it? How might that not always be an easy distinction to draw? However wonderful nature is, we always must remember that, in the end, it can’t save us. Only the God who created nature can. Why is it important to always keep that crucial truth in mind?
- ❷ What should we as Seventh-day Adventists have to say in regard to the whole question of the environment? What, if anything in our teaching, could be a helpful and needed component in this important question? At the same time, how should we respond to the following idea: “Well, we know the Lord is coming soon, and this whole world will be destroyed and then made over, so is the environment really that important?”
- ❸ In what ways today should all the incredible advancements in scientific and natural knowledge help increase our love of and appreciation for the power of God? Think of all the things we know about the natural world today of which the ancients had no inkling. Thus, in what ways do we have so many more advantages than they ever did in regard to being able to marvel at the creative power of the Lord?