

# Joel Vermillion | Season 2 Episode 02

## Learning Outside The Classroom

**Josh:** Welcome. Come to the everyday disciple makers podcast, and with me I have a good friend and today's guest, Joel Vermillion, Joel, welcome to the podcast.

**Joel:** Hey, thanks so much, Josh. It's great to join you here today.

**Josh:** It does seem a little strange that here we are neighbors literally in the same town, but here we're meeting on zoom to have an interview conversation. And I want to say thank you for taking time out. I know you've got a full plate and a lot of things but man, the last 15 years, we've had a chance to kind of get to know each other.

We've been in the same kind of life group together. We serve at the same church though at different times. I've had the pleasure of sitting in your back deck eating some of your culinary expertise coming, pulling right off, off the grill. And so I'm looking forward to that invite again.

But knowing just the shared life, ministry being in the same community, but I think what ties kind of our heart and friendship together as is a genuine desire to following Jesus, making disciples and thinking really the ministry Jesus how's that impact us. So the long conversations times and a coffee shops, times walking out together.

So Joel, I consider you a close ministry friend. But as well, someone we live life together. So yeah, I thank you again for joining us on this, on the show.

**Joel:** Hey. Yeah, thanks so much, Josh. It's a privilege for me. You and your family is really special to us and likewise just hold you in high esteem and I've always enjoyed our conversations. I feel like I'm often sharpened as we talk and get to hear your heart for the Lord for making disciples.

So get a chance to have a conversation like this today is a lot of fun for me. And hopefully it's a blessing for your, your constituency with Sonlife.

**Josh:** Yeah. So as we think about today, we're going to talk about the conversation of wilderness leadership, why it's important looking at scripture as kind of a context of that, but before we kind of get into a kind of nuts and bolts of what is wilderness leadership and why, why it's important for us as ministry leaders, just share with us, a little bit of, of your context, your story, how you stepped into wilderness leadership and how God's led you, where you're at now in ministry.

**Joel:** Yeah. Great. Thanks for that. You know, I've been involved in a professional sense in outdoor ministry. Since the early nineties. So that would be getting close to 30 years now. And it's really ties into my own story and my own relationship with Christ and my own upbringing. I grew up here in Oregon in the Clackamas area and attended church as a family when I was younger.

Going through high school a couple of, kind of big events really shaped me as oftentimes those events do. Probably the most profound one is that when I was a teenager between the summer, between my sophomore and junior years of high school my dad was killed in an accident.

He was injured very severely in an accident and died two days later. And that really rocked my world to say the least. He was really one of my closest friends, had a great dad. We were very close in a lot of ways. He spent a lot of time together. He really was my hero, so as a young man.

I was 16 at the time, a few days before my 17th birthday, he, he passed away. So that, that really, yeah, rock my world heading into my last few years of high school. And those last couple years of high school, I kind of walked away from the church. I remember asking questions about How God could allow bad things to happen.

And for me, the question was framed very specifically in terms of why would God let a great guy, like my dad die? And I remember the youth leader really kind of blew the question off and, and said, you know, was really about activities. Let's keep getting back to the games we're playing and the pizza we're eating.

And I was very off-put by that. I was very turned off by that. So I kind of walked away from church last couple of years of high school and said, if that's the best answer that I can get for a question like that, is this really something meaningful for me or not? After I finished high school I was looking at going to the Navy and when I was in that decision making process, my mom said that she'd like to send me to Europe for a year if I would go to Bible school for the first half of it.

And so she had been influenced significantly by the ministry of Torchbearers International and major Thomas. Some of your listeners may be familiar with Cape and Ray and the 40 schools. So she was one of the early German kids who was led to Christ by major Thomas in the fifties after world war two.

And after they bought Cape and Ray and started the. The Cape and Ray hall there in the Lake district of England. So I went to Bible school in Sweden. They have a school in Sweden and I had zero. She didn't go to Bible school. I had all the interest in traveling. I was eager to get away from Oregon.

I was eager to get away from just the context I was in. And it sounded like a fun adventure to me. And in my mind, I thought, yeah, I can put up with Bible school for six months if it frees up another six months to be able to get a Euro Rail pass and travel

around Europe. So I did that and You know always did, pretty well in school was a pretty good student.

So I wasn't a rabble-rouser at the Bible school, but I did the assignments, not with a desire to really get into scripture and learn and grow. But as you're studying scripture, God's Holy spirit has a way of convicting us and of drawing us to him. So I was reading one of the assignments was to read the Bible.

And so I was just hammering that assignment out and I got to Isaiah chapter 30, and God really used that chapter. I don't think my hermeneutics were, were excellent at that point, but the 30th chapter of Isaiah really It was a powerful moment. I remember I was sitting in the woods and Sweden, I was reading that chapter and God really convicted me.

And at that point I said, God, if you're real, I need help. I'd become more bitter as a person I'd become kind of angry. And I knew that allowing those qualities continue to grow in my life would only lead to a sad ending. And so I just said, God, if you're real, I need help. I, I'm still angry that my dad died like that.

But but I, I can't continue to go through life ongoing. I don't want to become a bitter person. So that's really where I asked Christ into my life and to be Lord of my life and , to interact in with him and his word and to to submit my life to what he said.

So the remaining time at Bible school, I don't really remember any specific assignments. I do remember a couple of people who really loved me well and were very compassionate to me and very caring of me as a young man who really that's the first time I cried after my dad died, had a lot of emotion inside of me. And so kind of helped me walk through that grieving process a little bit.

Fast forward after that I did travel. And during that Lord use that time in traveling to really give me a vision for other cultures as well. I ended up spending Christmas in Morocco in 19. That would have been 1990. And that was the beginning of the first Gulf war. And Americans weren't super popular in North Africa at that point and saw some American flags being burned on the streets and stuff.

And I had was traveling with a friend who was Canadian. So I like a good Canadian. He had multiple Canadian flags sewn onto his backpack. So I swiped one of those put on my backpack and started saying, eh, quite a lot. But it was, it is some of that time in Morocco that I realized a lot of people never heard the gospel, had never heard about Jesus.

And so that time traveling was actually very formative for me. Got to see quite a few things on the wall between East and West head was, had just been coming down and spent some time in Yugoslavia. Serajevo, when it was still Yugoslavia before it was divided into the six countries.

It is today. So I had quite a few pretty dramatic experiences during that time, traveling that really God started to grow my heart during that season to desire, to be part of his

kingdom work in other countries as well, to recognize a lot of people around the world who've never heard about Jesus and that there's a lot of opportunity.

So came back from my year in Europe and I ended up going to college at Biola. My brother was there, that's the main reason I went to Biola and started studying intercultural studies because the interest in international and I'll study, it started studying philosophy because just have a lot of good questions and that's the, those are the classes and those are the professors where I felt like those questions were given time and space where you were allowed to ask hard questions without being shut down.

And and it was both the, the intellectual rigor and. A discourse that we could have, but also the example of several of the professors that I had and had the privilege of building friendships with during the time that was very formative for me in growing a more of a vision for ministry and, and for what life could look like.

During those years of Biola, I took a rock climbing class. I've always loved the outdoors. I'd done a fair amount of backpacking when I was in high school. Good friend of mine named Gordon Nyberg, as I was a teenager, I think he was coming at lifeline during those hard years finishing high school.

He he's still a good friend. And he started taking me backpacking and just loved me. Just listen. Just, we just shared a lot of great experiences together and Mount Hood National Forest. But then in college started rock climbing and just, just went full and just loved rock climbing.

What a great sport was a ton of fun and really enjoyed the friendships I built with the rock climbers and getting to go out to Joshua Tree almost every weekend from Viola there and climbing and being God's creation.

As I continue to progress in my skills, my technical skills one of my professors had been a part of a ministry in, the Sierra Nevada Range in California called summit adventure, they're based out of bass Lake California and do a lot of outdoor courses in Southern Yosemite area. And he said he, he told me to check it out. So I did. So I applied for some information in a packet. And this was before the internet was used for anything like that. And so check it out and applied and was accepted and spent several summers in central California working with this ministry where we take young people outdoors. And for usually maybe five days to three weeks was the max. Most our courses were maybe a five days to a week, but we would be hiking with them.

We'd do some climbing with them. But notice how many opportunities we had to share the gospel during those times. Even then there was a lot of distractions in the urban environment before the days of iPhones and. All the apps that that can populate the phones.

But you know, we leave the Walkmans at home. We, we leave some of the distractions and just have sustained opportunity for discussion. We'd have shared experiences. Some

of those experiences were, were really trust-building when you're rock climbing with people or mountaineering with people, you have a chance to build trust in a way that you simply don't have in an urban environment.

And then the hour spent hiking on the trail. It had a lot of time for talking and just over time started to ask the young people who would come on the courses about their life, but their family, about their dreams, about their hopes for the future about the things that they were excited about, the challenges they faced, and just notice that young people really open up when they feel like they're cared for when they feel like they're really listened to and start to understand that a lot of young people in our world don't have adults in their lives who ask them serious questions and actually take the time to really listen intentionally to their answers yeah.

To have those discussions with them. And so were those one-on-one discussions with a lot of these young people had opportunity to share my story which is at that point still fairly raw in my life of my dad passing away and things I'd been through and how they came to know Christ in the ensuing years and, and what Christ was doing in my life. And I found a receptivity and an openness to that. And in a real response to that.

So for me, it, it, it, the outdoor ministry really didn't start with a real programmatic sense. It developed fairly organically at the ministry I was a part of, we would have some activities we would do, but I think those discussions on the trails with some of the young people who join us were really probably the pivotal thing that opened my eyes to the fact that that outdoors has a really compelling context for building relationships. And God's creation is a powerful classroom for sharing about Jesus Christ.

And at the same time, as I was studying scripture, as I was reading in the Bible, it started to pop out almost every page of how God regularly used his creation as a context for transforming the lives of his followers.

And we see it in the old Testament with different wilderness experiences with the whole nation of Israel. We see a lot of the Really important characters and scriptures in the scripture who had powerful transformative wilderness experiences of one time or another, and also see how Jesus regularly used the outdoors in God's creation in multiple ways to provide challenge for his disciples, whether it's the disciples paddling on the sea of Galilee and Mark chapter six immediately after Jesus fed the 5,000 with this the, the fish and the loaves.

Immediately he sent his disciples out onto the Lake. And when he sat on the hillside watching them and when they were afraid when they were facing a certain emotion is when he walked out to them. And if you read carefully what it says in Mark six, it says he, he he challenges a didn't you understand about the fish and loaves?

The challenge that he put them in immediately following that experience was in order that they would understand more clearly what he was actually trying to teach them. We

see that Jesus regularly used metaphors in God's creation, whether it's fig trees or wheat or grapes and vines. There's so many powerful object lessons in God's creation that Jesus used to help his disciples and help his listeners, uh, understand more clearly what he was trying to teach them about the kingdom of God.

And so I was, I started to ask the question, is this merely accidental? Or was there. Something intentional in, in what Jesus was trying to do in using God's creation as a context for, for growing his disciples. And is there an opportunity that we have today to glean some of the principles that we see very clearly in scripture and employ those same principles in the work God has called us to do the continuing work that he's called the church throughout history to do of making disciples.

And through my years of study and practice and experiences have become convinced that it wasn't accidental, that it was intentional. That we, I think in the modern world, have adopted our, our theory of education or pedagogy, primarily from an enlightenment view of what education is, which is a departure, I think, from what scripture models and what scripture teaches.

And so when we assemble as a teacher in a, in a classroom facing a group of students who are all in chairs, and we primarily focus on sharing information that we're missing out on some of the opportunity that Jesus intentionally employed, or he was walking with his disciples, he was teaching them as he was going, and it was using the experiences and the, and the context as really the classroom to deepen and to expand the learning opportunities beyond what we often do.

So, you know, in, in looking at scripture, it's, it's clear that at least 50% of Jesus' teaching was outdoors and it's clear that at least 10% was indoors. And I'd say there's a portion of that. We're not really clear from the context of a scripture whether it was indoors or outdoors, but and I don't want to make too much to a point to this, but I do regularly the challenge and would like to continue to challenge youth leaders today to think carefully about not only what Jesus said, but the context in which he said it and the ways in which he used examples and experiences in God's creation to further the point of what he was saying and to really highlight and drive home the point of what he was saying.

So I don't know if that answers your question, Josh, but that's

**Josh:** Yeah, there's, there's, there's a lot there. You dropped some really powerful nuggets of wisdom. And I think it's just interesting, like a summarize, what kind of word you heard you say, how God led you really through this wilderness experience through your own personal trials or own personal personal struggle, but then leading you to a school thinking through philosophy and wilderness and how then you've had to kind of wrestle with really the pedagogy, what was the, how we teach and why we teach and how wilderness and the philosophy together.

I think it was given you such a I don't know, Joel, just a strong mind thinking through this rather than just, Oh yeah. Hey, I love outdoors. Cause I love the adventure of rock climbing or I love the adventure of, of outdoor, you know, whitewater rafting. And I just so happened to, I love students as well.

And I think sometimes that's kind of where it stops. If I, if I were to be honest with you, when I look at my youth ministry experience, when I think of the outdoors, I often think of it in terms of, yeah. I want to take my students on a whitewater rafting trip, and then we'll have fun on the water.

There'll be teachable lesson, but that's just kind of how that's kind of where it stops. We'll do a day hike. We'll do a rock rock climbing or ropes course, or go to a camp and do a, you know, some kind of uh, outdoor leadership. But I don't think I've ever really thought about it as a really a strategy.

I don't think I've ever really thought about it in terms of actually looking at the context of how Jesus used the environment actually teach the lesson. So as you start to think, uh, maybe, maybe unpack that a little bit more for us in terms of the, the strategic way of making disciples and using wilderness leadership in that.

So unpack that a little bit more for us, if you, if you could.

**Joel:** Yeah, I appreciate that. That was a lot of my experience too. And I love Christian camps. I have no desire to disparage work that goes on, but I've seen what I would consider a lack of intentionality a lot of times, in terms of how those activities might be facilitated or led and where they're incorporated with specific teaching objectives for how they could be used to, to point people to Christ, and to point students, to Lord Jesus, and maybe challenge them in some ways. Because I think sometimes we, we reduce the wilderness or the outdoor adventures.

We might incorporate it in our youth ministry into simply an attraction that would get kids to sign up, pay whitewater rafting sounds like fun. Let's go for it. That'd be great. And you'll do a whitewater rafting day or weekend or something, and then you'll have some Bible teaching but really never even bridge from what was experienced on the river or the river itself as a, as a metaphor or as an object lesson and bridge that into some biblical teaching that can help connect the emotions that the students experienced with what they're learning from scripture at the Bible teaching.

So a lot of what we do in our ministry is, is try to help give tools for leaders. We have a very high value of the church. And so we focus a lot on church-based outdoor ministry. There's a lot of great outdoor ministries that are para churches, love them. God bless them. Hope they really, really flourish.

We do some, some training with camp staff as well. We get invited by different camp ministries or para-church ministries to help do some training and investment at times. But

where we have really focused our attention is on that point of being intentional. How can we grow in our understanding of biblical theology of wilderness and a biblical theology of experiential teaching?

And how can we capture some principles and give some tools to the people that we work with, that, that they might be able to use the outdoor activities they might already be doing, but use them more intentionally and be able to develop a strategy for how they can make disciples.

So there's a lot of ways of going about that. Good friend of mine, Ashley Denton wrote a book called *Christian Outdoor Leadership*. And in the English language, it's the one of the key books in the genre. There's a few books in the genre. There's not a lot of them, but he unpacks five themes in a biblical theology of wilderness that, that we've really latched onto in our ministry.

And of course that's permission where we see that you know, tempo, he's got, he loves his alliterations, but the, the tempo, the rhythm for where things are happening, oftentimes in scripture, we see that Jesus was a mastered timing of knowing when to give a lesson.

And like the example I mentioned earlier of Mark chapter six, Jesus timing for putting his disciples in the boat, on the sea of Galilee and waiting for the storm to arise and waiting for them to get to the point of experiencing these emotions of fear and of concern and of, of being nervous were really critical for them to understand what he wanted them to understand. So sometimes for us as youth leaders and as disciple makers, to recognize that the timing of when we share something can be really important to the, to the long-term impact.

The terrain is another one. You know, there was a landscape that we're in. If you're on a river, where does the Bible talk about rivers? What are some of the pictures of the Bible? Where does about we use rivers? What about vines? If you're hiking through vineyard, I was hiking through a vineyard in Serbia a few years ago with a group of students and we were literally hiking right through a vineyard is a great opportunity to pause and just look at some of the scriptural teaching that really draws on that picture, but can help to point to the truth of who Christ is.

And looking at John's gospel. Jesus has a powerful passage about being the true vine and so forth. So you look at trials and trust and training would be the fifth one then, but the ways that God regularly uses these opportunities in his creation to to give us opportunity to trust him. We sometimes in our youth ministry, I think we talk about trust and it's a fairly abstract concept when we talk about with teenagers about what it means to trust God.

And one of the things we see in scripture is that God gave opportunity for his followers to trust him in real practical real-life situations. And one of the things I love about the



wilderness context is that it provides ample opportunity for, for trusting one another. And then also for trusting God. And that can be a wide variety of things.

I lived in Sweden for 10 years after I finished my degree at Biola and my wife and I had been married. We lived in Belize for three years, and then we moved back to Sweden for 10 years and led an outdoor leadership program and outdoor ministry at the same Bible school in Sweden that I attended as a student.

And one of the things we would do there would, would be to go to the far North of Sweden in the spring for a ski trip. And it's a great opportunity to build trust with one another. And you're in a very, very harsh unforgiving terrain with a very, very cold, very windy, where you're really being very attentive to the basic details of life, just to make it through the experience in a safe way.

And so sometimes even the process of the facilitation that wouldn't happen when we're on the skis in the, in the mountains because people would get too cold, too quickly, even have short conversations. But at the conclusion of a week of back country skiing and sleeping the snow caves are intense and experienced in that context together would be a profound opportunity to talk about trust.

And what does it mean to trust in your, your other people in the group and what does it mean to trust God where some situations in our lives where we can employ that that same principle. So it can be in very simple things, trusting somebody is going to cook a meal for you, or who's, who's, who's steering the canoe that you're in and you're going twice as far as you need to go because they can't keep a straight line tracking down the river or the Lake.

Or it can be really life dependent types of situations like in a climbing setting where you're trusting somebody who might be a belayer on a climbing rope or in a really harsh outdoor contexts, like the far North of Sweden in the cold weather. We might be entering into that experience in a contrived way, in terms of signing up for a program or participating with this group, the emotions we feel when we're in that context, aren't contrived.

And I think sometimes we forget about the importance of that emotions play in our growth as followers of Christ. And that we I think sometimes we talk about the lesson or the theory of what it means to trust, but you don't actually go with students into a place where they need to trust where they get to practice it.

And that's why I love experiential teaching of all kind. When youth leaders take their students to serve in a homeless ministry downtown, or go on a missions trip or get out the rakes and the garden tools and go and serve some shut-ins from their church community.

It's in those really practical applications all the times that some of the powerful learning can take place. If we give time and space and if we learn to grow in our facilitation as

leaders for how we can help guide some of the learning and guide the conversation in a way that can open opportunities for students to really, really interact with scripture in a compelling, transformative way.

**Josh:** Let me make sure I got all five of those, because those are, I think a tempo and tempo and timing. Is this, is that the same, same con same one. Okay. Then you have terrain the trial , the trust, and training. Did I capture the five themes from, from

**Joel:** Yeah, I didn't do just a justice to tempo part of it is also Jesus' own rhythm of being outdoors, Luke 5:16, it says a Jesus regularly retreated to the wilderness to pray. And that's a discipline that we, as a, as a ministry team, we try to do not in a legalistic sense, but to have regular rhythm of being outdoors and God's creation, just, just listening, spending time in the word.

So tempo really has to do with that in terms of the own rhythm of our own lives, our own walk with Christ. Then there's timing, which is also timing, your questions and your activities and your, and the content the truths from scripture that you want to convey in, in really strategic moment when the chance for response might be at as great as so. Sorry. If I wasn't clear

**Josh:** Yeah, no, thanks for clarifying that up. I don't know if the tempo was the timing, but our standard, that, that Jesus had regular rhythms of solitude and silence, and Jesus had a rhythm of regular rhythm of listening to the voice of the father. But then there's the timing of then when to set that lesson, when to construct how to do that in the context of that.

So, no, that's, that's super helpful. And I think we will, we will link in the show notes to Ashley's book, I think the end of the day is what you're saying. Hey, there's theory. And oftentimes we have this moment of time of teaching in theory , but then as the experience and a couple of things, I just try to think through as ministry leaders, when I start working through the experience, I go, Oh man that's gonna take a lot of time. That's going to take a lot of resource. What if I don't really like the outdoors, let's be honest. What if the, I like some guys, like, man, I I'm just not an outdoors guy. You know, I have allergies and I'm I started thinking that going outdoors, athletically, I might, I might, am I going to go now to some kind of sports equipment store and just gear up and all this, you know, crazy, isn't gonna, what's the cost going to be?

So I can start thinking through all of these obstacles that might come in away. I understand it, Joel, but give me some practical things. How what's our next steps? What would it be some low hanging fruit to help me think through, not just in theory, but experience, you mentioned a few things like going out raking leaves or gone to a

ministry that serving with the people on know homeless ministry or something like that, but, but kind of helped me want to start thinking through wilderness leadership, wilderness experiences, what would be my next step?

**Joel:** Yeah, well, the good news is that there's no REI when Jesus was walking the earth. So I think sometimes we put the pressure on ourselves that, yeah, I needed to go drop my life savings, that REI to be able to go hiking for a day. And that's simply not true. Low tech can be really good. Sometimes we can equip a group pretty easily from a Goodwill, just find some old wool and you might set some style points at the same time for the older styles.

So you're right there. Sometimes we do hear those, those concerns people raise in terms of I'm not really athletic or I've never rock climbed before. You know, I think that the start is I would encourage leaders that does too, maybe one day a week, start by taking your own time of prayer outdoors. Find a local park close to your home where there's a corner of it that isn't right on a, on a walkway where people will be passing by all the time where you can just be in God's creation, listening to the birds, seeing the trees being in that context, and just look around as you pray and understand that this is God's creation. And that Romans one remains true that God shares so its elements of his character, of what he's like through his creation. In that we, as modern educators, rely on the four walls of a human made context more than any other generation in history has. That it's us who are really stepping away from. What is what has practically been appreciated? And I think just really understood for, for several thousand years.

So I would encourage people. You don't need to be an outdoor stud to involve outdoors in your ministry. And I think it starts in your own, in your own life and your own walk. We can't really share with other people, things that we don't have. So I would say start with one day a week, take an hour outdoors, take your Bible take a journal, spend time and just, just pause for a few moments and enjoy being in that place, if you have a place close to your home, and I'm thankful you've got a nature park right across the street from our house.

So it's easy for me to walk out the door and five minutes later, I am surrounded by an Oak Savanna and Oak trees. And I can hear road noise in the distance, but I can hear the birds louder. So I think that would be the start.

And I would say you don't need to start with, you know, back country skiing and the North of Sweden for your first outdoor trip. There's certain contexts that will take more skill and will take more training and more preparation to be able to do it safely, to be able to do it in a responsible way. We always recognize that we have other people's kids who were with us, and that's a big responsibility to be responsible for, for young people in a context where there is risk.

There is some amount of danger. And so learning how to manage the risk in a healthy way, but, but not try to mitigate all the feeling of risk. I mean, we can get into the topic of risk a little bit here in a few moments if you want to. So I think we have some fundamental misunderstandings of risk in our culture in general, but know, and sort of in terms of low hanging fruit, I would say plan a day hike, find an area where you can take a group of students hiking for a day and look at how you could include what might be a teachable moment or some object lesson that we see in scripture that you could use with your students.

Maybe start with Psalm one and the picture of the tree planted by streams of living water, as a contrast as, as really a picture, as a metaphor for the righteous person in Psalm one. And it stands in stark contrast with a wicked person who is compared to chaff that the wind blows away.

And so there's some pretty low hanging fruit in terms of looking at that and asking that question, what does it mean to be planted by streams of living water? What is the psalmist trying to get at and why is it important to be like a tree? So apart from Greenland, I didn't, haven't been any countries that don't have a lot of trees, so that's. So that's an opportunity for low-hanging fruit of just taking a day hike where the equipment needs are, are pretty minimal where the training needs are fairly minimal. You're not introducing any high risk activities that require a lot of training or equipment in order to do that safely, but you can do but, but do some things like that to start out. There's so many places. And around us that have different types of environments where we can be exposed to elements in God's creation.

That can point us to truth that we read about in scripture. And that can help us understand in a, in a, in a multifaceted way, some of the truth that God wants us to understand and employ in our lives.

**Josh:** Yeah. I love that. I think a few summers ago I had a friend who challenged me a little bit. He said, Josh, would you just says, consider the birds. When's the last time you've considered the birds. So he challenged me to get a bird app on my phone. And before I journaled anything in scripture to pause and see how many birds were around and consider the birds and hear their song and identify their song.

And it was like, it was, it sounds funny. But what it did, uh, caused me to slow down and, uh, cause me to consider the things around me that I was totally unaware of and forced me to go outdoors and forced me to kind of just consider the birds. And so I think kind of what you're doing here, you're, you're causing us to consider something.

And I think in our culture we move at such a fast pace and I love a common book we both share by love master plan of evangelism by Robert Coleman. And he talks about kind of the, the strategy of Jesus is so profound and it shatters really our, our conclusions

on so many things. And the strategies is reality is it's slow, it's arduous, it's relational, and it's so unassuming and it's so silent.

It's unnoticed by the hurried churchmen. And I think as a wilderness ministry, if I'm hearing what you're saying, it kind of helps us think through the Jesus actually had an intentional relational strategy of investing in a few. Just like your friend Gordon took you out and he invested in, you, took you out and spend time with you what would you say just in terms of training and outdoor leadership, how does, how does that help support in terms of. Investing investing into few especially with ministry leaders, maybe who are lacking of training, maybe needing, encouragement, supporting them.

How have you seen the effectiveness if you will, of wilderness leadership? Give us some, some stories around that, investing in a few, slowing down observing the world around us. You kind of give us a few snapshots of that, but I know you've got more stories and more opportunities to kind of share on around that.

**Joel:** Oh, I could go all night with stories, Josh you're right. But I appreciate the question and it gets back to something that you pointed to earlier, but sometimes one of the barriers, people think is it takes too much time and I would pause and say, well, what are your real goals? If it's to execute the program that you're doing, then yeah.

It might not fit really well, but if it's sustained time and conversation, building relationship, building trust, then I know a few better contexts or strategies then wilderness and ministry towards that end because we do live in a very, very fast paced world. And one of my concerns is that maybe we have sometimes reduced youth ministry to program where we feel like executing the programs that we have planned out starts to, we start to see that as really the, and rather than the means.

I was on a call. I'm on a call on a weekly basis with a group of youth leaders in Europe. And one of the leaders this week Pointed out this, this quote from Coleman's book that you mentioned earlier he said here that the best work is all is done with a few better to give a year or so to one or two people who learn what it means to conquer for Christ than to spend a lifetime with a congregation, just keeping the program going.

And I don't want to imply that every congregation is simply in that mode, but is it possible that we can get into that mode where our goal becomes keeping the program going and and we start to make the program the end rather than the means. So in the same with wilderness ministry, wilderness ministry can become the end in terms of people saying I'm going to leave 10 backpacking trips this year.

Um, and I'm, I wanna check off certain boxes in my Excel spreadsheet, as opposed to including it as a rhythm of their life of, of, of stepping back away from the urban context in which most of us live and to the wilderness to pause and spend time with people. So in terms of strategy, I think it's, it's a very compelling strategy for disciple-making in a modern, fast paced world for several reasons.

One is that it gives sustained time for relationship, as I alluded to earlier in my early experience and, and in California, because how often do we have hours and hours and hours to simply have conversation with people. And so backpacking is usually what I encourage people to start with first, because it's kind of low-hanging fruit in terms of the, the skill level or the technical ability that's needed.

There's often backpacking areas within a couple of hours of where people live. They don't need a lot of special training, a lot of real specialized equipment and so forth to be able to, to take a group backpacking, but can be very, very powerful opportunity. And. In a week in an outdoor context like that, you have chance for sustained conversation for sharing life stories, for sharing meals together, for sharing sunsets together.

Some times we leave our cell phones at home and don't even help those with us or the times the batteries just die, or we just keep them in the backpack. So there are few distractions for those relationships as well.

When my experience and I've been involved in youth ministry and local church, and I love it. You've got the Wednesday evening and, you know, put something on the grill and have a group of guys over and get into scripture. And usually it feels a little bit rushed where bill comes, I'm able to come play and, you know, try to settle down and have some conversation and then people are need to go cause we've got other commitments. So having several days or a week, a sustained time together. Creates a place and an opportunity that we rarely have in our busy urban lives for, for building relationship, for digging into God's word for, for building trusting, really meaningful ways for praying for one another.

And I find that the relationships that I build on the trail lasts quite a long time. I'm still remain good friends with quite a few of the students who have participated in outdoor leadership programs that I've led over the years. And I think that's because you have real experiences together and you share lives together and really meaningful ways.

And in, in ways that that build trust and build build friendship that we don't get to experience as often as we might hope to in our lives. So I think that's one way that it's a good strategy. You know, I think it gets back to what was Jesus strategy? What was Jesus really trying to do?

He had 12 disciples that he invested in deeply and he spent most of the time. With those disciples, the majority of his, of his hours are spent with them. He did preach to large groups. He would do some urban ministry and healing people, healing the sick and casting out demons and speaking to people and so forth. But you, you know John chapter 20, it says that, you know, if we wrote down everything, Jesus did, the earth will be full of the books that we'd write.

And. So the implication is that there are many episodes and times and conversations where Jesus was probably looking at the stars with his disciples, sharing a meal around

a fire or camping by, by the sea of Galilee with them as they were journeying from one place to another.

And that those times of sustained conversation and interaction, I think were a part of the process of what he had planned for growing his disciples and for helping to build them into the people that he wanted them to become and preparing them for the leadership that they would have in the future in, in his church. So the opportunity I think, and one of the reasons we focus on church ministry is that we really value those long-term relationships.

Camp ministries are great, but a lot of times they're organized in such a way that the leaders who might lead a week of camp for group of students, never see those students again. And if we can help local churches develop a backpacking program and they take a group of their kids backpacking for, you know, one week a year with leaders from the church, adults and, and staff from the church, then they have a chance for building really lifelong disciple-making relationships in what they experienced together in that week, outdoors will carry into the rest of the year.

So, okay. In the model that we promote with our church partners is to. Encourage them to recruit adults in the church who can, who can, you can imagine being part of something for a number of years, not just for a week in the summer, and that they might be part of the ongoing youth ministry, build relationships with the young people, meet with them, for coffee and get together with them as they're going through their everyday life in the, in the high school.

And what we see come out of that, what I've seen in my own life with young people that I build relationships with is that they're willing to open up. After we spend time together, usually in the summer on a backpacking trip and experiencing things together that they trust me in a way that they wouldn't have trusted me otherwise.

And there, when I ask them in the, in the ongoing school year, how are you doing? How's your. Walk with Christ. What are the things you're facing? What are challenged? How can I be praying for you that there's an openness and a responsiveness to those questions with the people that I've been on the trail with that I don't see with the people that I haven't been on the trail with in general.

And so it's not a silver bullet, it's not a magic potion. It's simply the time that you invest. It's like putting pennies in the bank. And when you go on a backpacking trip, you're putting dollar bills in the bank. The bank account is getting credited in ways that that bear fruit for quite a few years and, and future relationship with the students that you participate with.

So it's I, the strategy is that it's it, it's something we see regularly in Jesus' own life and ministry in that as we deploy those same principles in our modern world, it's a very effective tool for. For making disciples and for walking with people during in life and the

challenges that they face and in continuing to point them to Christ building the trust and the credibility that as, as the relationship continues into an everyday life context, that we can continue to support, encourage exhort pray for. And, and, and in general build a relationships that are going to lead towards long-term. Disciple-making.

**Josh:** Yeah. I love, I love the heartbeat, tying it back to the strategy. Jesus, what did he do? Looking at the biblical themes of how to God using the wilderness and outdoors. I think as our ministry leaders, as they're listening to this as spring is here summers as coming. So maybe what are some practical ways for us as listeners thinking through this podcast and saying, Hey what's one way I can take my small group out and go to the, go to the park and look at scripture and looking at ways to connect it to that terrain or environment.

And then, you know, thinking through that, I love that. So that's my challenge to us as listeners, that we would take us to heart that we would start taking our disciples out on the trail and figuring out ways to actually that looking at the long game. I think that's what you said is that deposit putting the deposits in their lives with a long-term relationship. And I love that long-term you know, perspective and not just this temporary, Hey, I'm gonna teach you something as the it's the lesson, but actually it's the long-term experience. I want to put my life into you.

Joel, I appreciate your, your time here. I wanna, I want to just end with, you know, you've had an opportunity to invest in ministry leaders around the world.

You've had opportunity to kind of think and rustle through a lot of things that are happening. In light of just ministry and context. What, what things are right now, maybe you're thinking about you're reading. What right now, stirring your hearts.

**Joel:** Yeah, no, I appreciate that. It's a tumultuous time for all of us. Isn't it. There's a lot going on around the world. Let me, let me mention one thing here that may be helpful to the audience, you know, if you would have asked me a few years ago, would you guys have wilderness ministry Institute ever build an online course?

I would have said no way because it's not what we're about, but we did build an online courses last year with COVID because the the inquiries actually increased dramatically for us as a ministry in this last year. And I think a lot of leaders that I've talked with we're faced with a situation that they hadn't anticipated, where a lot of the events in the large group and indoor activities that they had really relied on for their ministry model were truncated or cut short of what they had expected and we're looking for their strategies. And so we did put together an online course. You can find it. [www.wildernessministry.org](http://www.wildernessministry.org) click the courses tab it's free. And that's a combination of videos and a workbook that can



maybe be helpful for you as you start to think biblically about wilderness and about experiential learning. And that will be a good starting place.

I think we've had good feedback from it, the course so far, and we're really pleased that leaders are finding it very helpful around the world. It's not perfect. We're not going to claim that we've got some type of a corner on this market. We don't, but we're just trying to provide some tools that might be useful for ministry leaders who were saying, Hey, I really want to connect with the students that I have, but I'm facing challenges in doing that.

I don't know how to do that right now, because a lot of the tools that I'd use a long time I can't use the tools in the same way right now. You know, I think the in conversation I've had with people around the world it's, there's been there's been a few common themes that have arisen over this last year.

And that's how do you lead well, in a, in a context like this, where the maybe political situation is other than you would want it to be, or you're shut down by government leaders from running activities that you might plan on running and so forth. And what we've really focused on as ministry is let's return to our own relationship with Christ. Let's let's remember that, you know, in Colossians chapter two, how Paul's I love what Paul says and he says, be rooted in him that we as ministry leaders, our first priority needs to be being rooted in Christ to walking with him, following him and that in our own lives that we would be rooted so that when the challenges arise. We're not kicked off of our horse or, or out of the game because we we've put so much emphasis on on a, on a technique as opposed to relationships with Christ. So I think first and foremost for the folks listening here to, to, to make sure that in your own life and walk with Christ, that you're spending time in prayer and scripture and fellowship with other believers and really pursuing an ever deepening relationship with Christ.

Secondly, I think a lot of leaders are being, I think they're really being challenged in their model. I think there are, I think ministries that have relied on events have been kind of exposed, whether they might've used the word disciple-making or discipleship, but COVID has exposed the fact that maybe they were really about organizing events. And if you feel like you've been in that position where the last year has been kind of screamed to a halt and try to reimagine what your ministry is about. Ask yourself some hard questions about what does it mean to make disciples and how are you being intentional and strategic that the events and the programs that you put on the calendar are a means to an end of disciple-making and not the end of themselves.

The. I think that the drive towards smaller groups has been very helpful this last year. Actually, I think there's a lot of people who are connecting with small groups. And I think, I think that gets back in closer to what you Jesus actually did. He focused a lot of his time and energy on a few people, and there's a real value to that for us as ministry leaders, to

recognize that multiplication is the strategy that Jesus used and that we should be using as well, where we become less and less concerned with large groups and big numbers and more focused on doing life and really investing deeply in the lives of the people that God brings into our life.

So, you know, I've been reading a variety of things I've been returning to Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of my favorites both I, the Metaxas biography about him and some of his writings returning to some of those things and just, just reflecting on his writings and thoughts as somebody who I lived through a very tumultuous time and it was, was desiring to serve Christ and be the of the leader in the church in a very challenging period of history.

So that's one of the things I've been reading several other things as well. I've been studying more the life of Daniel and the book of Daniel and seeing Daniel as somebody who was called to lead in a very challenging time from the exile away from Jerusalem. And in a context in the Babylonian empire where had very few rights, so to say so to speak, but God used him in tremendous ways.

He and his friends in, in significant ways to influence the culture around them, from the position of an exile, from the position of really not of authority when they arrived in Babylon, they were there as exiles as slaves to serve the, the King of Babylon. But even from that posture, they were able to have a primary posture of dependence on God and a real deep rootedness in who they were as followers of God almighty and able to influence people around them, through their faith and through, through trusting God and through the very dramatic trials that they went through.

So yeah, again, I'm not sure if that fully answers your question or what you're going for, but those are things I've been thinking about. And in tune on it was last year.

**Josh:** Yeah. I love that. The clarity of saying, Hey, if we're not making disciples and what are we doing? And if all of our, all of our efforts have been about events around the gathering around, whether it be the, the events of we can call it even a Sunday morning church sometimes that's the gathering or our ministry, our nonprofits around that, but is that really functioning to equip and, and build really robust followers of Jesus making disciples and the emphasis of investing in a few going smaller.

And so Joel, you, you hit a number of, of significant thoughts and maybe another in a future podcast, we can talk more on why are we so risk adverse? And how do we have, how do we embrace risk? Because I think that you threw that out there and I wanted to pick that up, but I realized that would probably be another hour of the podcast. yeah, yeah.

**Joel:** Did we talk, I'd actually love to have a chance to chat with you about that, Josh, because I think it's a key thing. I think we do live in a very risk averse culture where we see risk as a bad thing and forget that Jesus used risk with his disciples regularly. So is there a biblical theology of risk and how can we think in biblical terms about risk? So.

**Josh:** would love to continue that conversation because I can't tell you how many times I've heard this phrase in abundance of caution. We will blah, blah, blah. And, and some of that's good. We need to have an abundance of caution. I understand that. But I think sometimes what happens is it affects you know, really how to Jesus use the environment and taking risks even just going to Cesarea Philippa and seeing where Jesus took his disciples.

And so here's just a quick Sonlife plug. If you want to go to Israel, we do have a Sonlife study tour we've canceled, postponed and all that kind of stuff. So our listeners, we do have a PA tour happening in October. Feel free to find out more information about that, but Joel, how would people find more about you, your ministry? You gave us the website, but anything else that week people can follow up all along with you.

**Joel:** We I'm so currently serve as the director of the wilderness ministry Institute. They can you find out more about us at [www.Wildernessministry.org](http://www.Wildernessministry.org)? It's a brand new website. We're still building it out, but we've got a few courses that are listed there. We've got the online course. We have several in-person courses coming up over this year that we have scheduled. So you can read about those and dates and locations. And if you like too, I think the first step would be to pick up Ashley's book Christian Outdoor Leadership. I think another first step would be to do this foundation of wilderness ministry online course just to have a chance to, to think a little bit about some of the principles that we've talked about today and a little bit more, more depth maybe. And if you find that stirs some something in you and you want to get further connected with us as a ministry or one of the other outdoor ministries in your area, we're pretty well networked with a lot of the wilderness and ministries globally. And so even if you're not able to participate in one of our courses just shoot me an email. You can, you can fill out the inquiry thing online. That'll get an up in my email box and let me know where you live and what your interest is. And there's a chance. I might know somebody in your neck of the woods is doing similar things and maybe you can build a friendship with them and learn from them. So we don't have You know our ministry. We want to see the Lord honored. We want to see people made disciples. We don't try to promote our name a lot. We want to, but we

want to see healthy, intentional transformative wilderness ministry being used around the world to, to proclaim the gospel in a very winsome way.

The young people can understand or respond to and to make disciples. So that's what, that's what we're about. As an organization. We've got a great team really thankful for the team members.

**Josh:** Yeah. Well, thank you, Joel, for your your friendship. Most importantly, your story that you lightness with and look forward to having a richer conversation. So thank you Joel, for your time.

**Joel:** Okay, thank you, Josh. Appreciate the time with you. Let's get together for coffee pretty soon and appreciate your, your audience here. So God bless.