

Cousins Camp, Part 2
Sherry Bitler, Guest Writer

Today's Treasure

*Know therefore that the Lord your God is God,
the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him
and keep his commandments to a thousand generations.*

Deuteronomy 7:9

As we finish out this series of Treasures Along the Way, my dear friend, Sherry Bitler describes why she does Cousins Camp and offers lots of practical ideas for accomplishing her goals. Though you might not be able to schedule several days at a time with your grands, Sherry's ideas are terrific for a day or part of a day. In fact, I'm hoping to incorporate some of her fun activities into special days with our littles this summer. Sometimes when we hear what others are doing, we feel inadequate, less than, or failures. Don't let the enemy lead you down that pathway. Each of us is unique, but God's calling is the same. The way we live out our calling may look different for each of us.

From Sherry -

As a young mom, it was important to me that our children learn about the God I was growing to know. Volunteering at our church gave me plenty of opportunities to join other parents who shared that passion. Together we took Scripture, added fun activities, and trusted the Lord to impact the hearts of the littles who walked through the doors. The Lord used those times to lead me into formal children's ministry when our children headed off to college. Eventually, I retired from my staff position.

*So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me,
until I proclaim your might to another generation,
your power to all those to come.*

Psalms 71:18

Now, as a grandmother, my heart is more passionate than ever. With some medical limitations, I need to keep my pace slower, and the number of students small. The Lord showed me that planning some intentional structured time with our grandchildren would fuel my passion to obey these verses and bless us in ways that we would not imagine.

COUSINS CAMP was born. The children needed to be potty trained, able to communicate clearly, and content to be away from mommy. We are together for 48 hours straight – 2 nights and 2 days. The first summer, eight of our twelve grandchildren qualified. They came with sleeping bags - girls in one room and boys in another.

I choose a backdrop theme for each camp. We used Stars Wars, Sea Creatures, Christmas in July, Olympics, Circus, and Manners, to name a few.

I choose a Scriptural theme. We are BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING. We have focused on a specific verse, or the one another verses in the Bible, verses about doing our best for God, the ten commandments, the importance of prayer, the verses about putting others first, loving and forgiving each other.

I develop an agenda. My first Cousins Camp I planned every minute of their time with me, worried idle time would lead to problems. I remember that first year I woke up before any of the 'camper grands' and I heard a sound from my computer – SKYPE – my sister was checking in. As soon as the video appeared (she could actually see me sitting in front of the computer) she burst into laughter. It took a second, but I realized the wear and tear of the first day of camp was very obvious to her. Looking at my own picture on the computer I joined the laughter! As sisters, we are totally aware of the lengths we will go to create memories for our grandchildren.

When our first Cousins Camp was history, I allowed the children to share with me what they liked and anything they didn't like. Gratefully, they loved it all. However, they did ask for more time to just play freely with their cousins. FREE TIME became part of the schedules in the future, and gave me a little break as well.

Our favorites were Minute to Win It games, scavenger hunts, obstacles courses, bonfires with marshmallows, one year we did tie dye shirts, one year we painted donuts on a canvas for our theme DO NOT WORRY – and used scripture verses about worry, and of course swimming in our above ground pool – day swims and the night swims. Thank you Pop Pop for setting up lights!

I used quarters as prizes, giving each child a ziplock bag with their name on it. I bought a roll of tickets at Walmart and they could earn them for various things and redeem them at my grab basket of inexpensive toys. Oversized ziplock bags or pocket file folders held crafts or items that needed to head home as reminders of our lesson.

My meals were kid friendly and dessert was first. The year our theme was Star Wars, I had signs that labeled all the foods with relatable titles – Yoda soda or Vader Veggies,

etc. Goggle ideas or Pinterest ideas were relied on heavily. I would keep Cousins Camp in mind whenever shopping, often finding things like plastic hotdog sleeves or crazy straws. Spending a little time at the Dollar Store might add fun touches to your time together. We usually make popcorn and have plastic containers that look just like the paper ones you get at the movie theatre. Walmart had campfire sticks for the s'mores as well.

By the way, it is helpful to have a Plan B in your pocket if the weather doesn't cooperate or a video if some rest time is needed. And take LOTS of pictures. Maybe grandfather can help with that – you might be too preoccupied.

I am so incredibly grateful for our grandchildren. The last couple of years I have had to rely on one of our daughters-in-law to help me manage our events. I know these Cousins Camps are a gift from the Lord. I am so grateful that learning about Him for many of the children is part of their story. I have some grandchildren who aren't church-ed and I am so grateful that they have these times with me and their cousins.

LIFE GIVING ENCOURAGEMENT

The memories made through the years at Cousins Camp are priceless treasures to me and from the sounds of it, to the cousins as well. It is a privilege. Yes, camp is work. It is planning, there is some expense, there are moments of major chaos, there are sometimes conflicts to resolve, the food is less than healthy at times, but there is also lots of hugging and kissing. Yes, the house needs a thorough cleaning when I am finished. Yes, there is some waste. Yes, my body needs time to recuperate. Some games work out better than others. Yes, my husband gets a little overwhelmed. But we are learning to really love each other, understand each other better, and uncover new talents and interests. They know that I will always point them to Jesus. They know that Pop Pop and I pray for them all the time.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for this idea of Cousins Camp, I am grateful for the opportunity. I treasure the memories we have already made in years passed. I pray the lessons are embedded in their hearts. Some are now older and committed to summer jobs. Please help me to have the strength and focus to grab onto making these summer moments count until they have all moved into adulthood. If Cousins Camp needs to look different, please give me the ideas I need to make this a part of the legacy I leave for our precious grands. I pray that one day they will be sharing Your story with the next generation!

From Sharon –

Our next series starting tomorrow is *A Steadfast Woman in a Shifting World*, We will camp out in Psalm 62 as well as review some practical disciplines that help us stay steady when our world shifts beneath us. There are treasures in this Psalm that helped me walk a steady path when the earth shifted beneath my feet. I'm eager to share them with you.