

When I was a Scoutmaster, it was sometimes touch and go whether we actually went on a planned campout. One winter, seven hardy souls decided to brave the cold and go to Foster Falls, a local state park. The weather, except for being cold, was absolutely beautiful! The temperature fell about 15 degrees F on the first night, which was an excellent test for our 15 degree sleeping bags. We found out what that spec really meant: you won't die, but you will be very cold. I wore my winter underwear, two pair of socks, and several layers on my upper body, but I was still cold. It seemed that there was a draft flowing through my tent, and whenever I left the top of my sleeping bag open I felt the cold air rushing in. I was not shivering, but I was certainly not totally comfortable.

The first night was the night of the winter solstice, and so was the longest night of the year. It was so cold that most of the Scouts went to bed about 6:30 PM after we had cooked our supper. As they did not get up until about 6:30 AM, this meant that they were "in the bag" for a solid 12 hours. But it was so cold that there was not much else to do.

I can't stand to be still for a whole night long, and I have some perverted need to get up early when its cold and dark to start a fire. So I got up a little before 5:00 AM and eventually got the fire started. I almost froze in the process, but it was worth it to be able to get warm. I could then move around a little in the cold and then return to the fire. The moon was almost full, which made the area look very pretty. Once the moon went down, I went to a nearby ravine where there was a little waterfall and looked at the brilliance of the stars. You just can't see them like this when you are in town.

The other Scouts eventually got up and began to get ready for breakfast. They all came out of their tents with frost on their heads from the condensation inside the tent. We all found that most of our water supplies had frozen. One canteen I had inside the sleeping bag did not freeze, but was surely responsible for keeping my feet cold. I don't know even now which I would rather have; cold feet or unfrozen water. The eggs and bacon were frozen (yes, the bacon, too). All attempts to thaw things out by the fire resulted in melting the plastic containers. Melted boots seemed to be the latest rage as well.

One thing that I learned from my early morning experience trying to build the fire was that I don't have the warmth within myself to make it when things get rough. In our normal life we are not subjected to life-threatening cold. But this trip could have been deadly if we had not had external sources of warmth. With my body shivering and my hands shaking so bad that I could hardly light a match, I realized that I could not make it alone. Without that fire I could freeze to death. Even in the sleeping bag, with "passive warmth" and a lot of insulation I was not at peace. We all need something outside of us that gives us life and energy. We need God and His strength "radiated" into us. We should never forget that in Scouting or in life.