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## Ascent

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Shelbi Gesch

## Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 121](#)

[Micah 7:18-20](#)

[Romans 3:21-31](#)

There are few better ways to test your spiritual response in times of difficulty than setting out on an arduous hike that's just beyond your state of physical fitness with a few friends. When our daughter was about ten months old, my husband and I and the youth group we co-led took a camping trip out to Yosemite National Park and experienced this for ourselves.

Having set up camp the night before, we started out early the next chilly morning on the trail to Vernal Falls, a moderately difficult uphill hike (one website rates it as “strenuous”) with our daughter in a backpack carrier. About an hour into the climb, just as we were beginning to seriously tire, we reached a respite: a level place with a breathtaking view of the park, Half Dome rising over one end of the valley, the river below, and Bridal Veil Falls far in the distance. On that April day, the snow had mostly melted off, and spring was just beginning to stretch its green yawn across the valley.

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
the Maker of heaven and earth. Ps. 121: 1-2*

Burned into my memory, that scene of the Yosemite valley stretched out in front of me so much like a living postcard that it hardly seemed real is what I picture when I read the opening to Psalm 121: “I lift up my eyes to the hills.”

Psalm 121 is a “song of ascents.” *The Message* calls it a “pilgrim song.” Psalm 121 was the part of the hymnbook that the Children of Israel opened to on their way up to the Temple to worship. Songs of Ascent were written to get the people in the right frame of mind for worship as they climbed up the hill to Jerusalem.

*He will not let your foot slip—  
he who watches over you will not slumber;  
indeed, he who watches over Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep. Ps. 121: 3-4*

Reading Psalm 121, I imagine the families of Israel, carrying small children like we were, urging them along, were grateful to have songs to sing along the way, as they reminded their children and themselves of the faithful God who would be their tireless keeper, their shade from the heat of the sun, and their savior from evil and death.

*The Lord watches over you—  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;  
the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night. Ps. 121: 5-6*

Our hike up Mist Trail to Vernal Falls was an education in ascent. The trail was steep, difficult, and the only way we managed to make it to the Falls was by sharing the burden, trading off the baby backpack. Just when our aches and pains called for attention the loudest, the beauty around us called louder, shifting our attention from complaint and

misery to wonder and praise. Hearing the roar of the falls louder with each climbing step and imagining the view from the top of the trail pushed us further, step by painful step. The glimpses of grandeur we got along the way were a powerful palliative to the discomfort of the climb.

*The Lord will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over your life;  
the Lord will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore. Ps. 121: 7-8*

How many times in life do we get lost in the climb, turn our focus inward to our own pain and struggle and forget to stop, pray, and look out around us at the beauty in the work God is doing? We who have a God who delights in being our sustainer in times of difficulty can rest in and rely on His faithfulness. We can look out beyond our experience, expectantly, and trust that He is present even in the midst of our trials.

John Piper writes about [joy being something worth fighting for](#). In the midst of our difficulties and pain, searching for moments of beauty in our struggles is worth that same kind of warfare. We do not ascend on our own strength, nor do we ascend alone.

How blessed we are that our help doesn't come from the mountains, but the One who made the mountains.