

CFBC Hymns Class 24
Augustus Toplady (1740-1778)

“Toplady died in 1778 (aged 38) from tuberculosis. He never married, his life and ministry were short, and he certainly had his share of flaws. But God was pleased to use him to write a hymn that would so powerfully communicate the gospel and encourage the saints that his name and story have been preserved to this day.”

<https://www.challies.com/articles/hymn-stories-rock-of-ages/>

**Excerpts from “Augustus Montague Toplady & His Ministry”...Taken
from Christian Leaders of the 18th Century (by Bishop J. C. Ryle
First published in 1885)**

...For soundness in the faith, singleness of eye, and devotedness of life, Toplady deserves to be ranked with Whitefield, or Grimshaw, or Romaine. Yet with all this, he was a man in whom there was a most extraordinary mixture of grace and infirmity. Hundreds, unhappily, know much of his infirmities who know little of his graces.

Augustus Montague Toplady was born at Farnham, in Surrey, on the 4th of November 1740. He was the only son of Major Richard Toplady, who died at the battle of Carthage shortly after his birth, so that he never knew his father. His mother's maiden name was Catherine Bates, of whom nothing is known except that she had a brother who was rector of St. Pauls, Deptford. About the history of the family I can discover nothing. I can only conjecture that some of them must have been natives of Ireland. Who his parents were, and what they were doing at Farnham, when he was born, and what kind of people they were, are all matters about which no record seems to exist.

...He was an only child, and died unmarried; so that he had neither brother, sister, son, nor daughter, to gather up his remains. Moreover, he was one who lived much in his study and among his books, spent much time in private communion with God, and went very little into society. Like Romaine, he was not what the world would call a genial man and had very few intimate friends and was, probably, more feared and admired than loved. But be the reasons what they may, the fact is undeniable that there is no good biography of Toplady. The result is, that there is hardly any man of his calibre in the last century of whom so little is known.

The principal facts of Toplady's life are few, and soon told. He was brought up by his widowed mother with the utmost care and tenderness, and retained throughout his life a deep and grateful sense of obligation to her.

For some reason, which we do not know now, she appears to have settled at Exeter after her husband's death; and to this circumstance we may probably trace her son's subsequent appointment to the cure of souls in Devonshire. Young Toplady was sent at an early age to Westminster School, and showed considerable ability there. After passing through Westminster, he was entered as a student at Trinity College, Dublin, and took his degree there as Bachelor of Arts. He was ordained a clergyman in the year 1762; but I am unable to ascertain where, or by what bishop he was ordained. Shortly after his ordination he was appointed to the living of Blagdon, in Somersetshire, but he did not hold it long. He was then appointed to Venn-Ottery, with Harpford, in Devonshire, a small parish near Sidmouth. This post he finally exchanged, in 1768, for the rural parish of Broad Hembury, near Honiton, in Devonshire, a cure which he retained until his death.

In the year 1775 he was compelled, by the state of his health, to remove from Devonshire to London, and became for a short time preacher at a Chapel in Orange Street, Leicester Square. He seems however, to have derived no material benefit from the change of climate; and at last died of decline...in the year 1778, at the early age of 38.

The story of Toplady's inner life and religious history is simple and short; but it presents some features of great interest. The work of God seems to have begun in his heart, when he was only sixteen years old, and under the following circumstances. He was staying at a place called Codymain, in Ireland, and was there led by God's providence to hear a layman named Morris preach in a barn. The text Ephesians ii. 13, "Ye who were sometimes far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" and the address founded on it, came home to young Toplady's conscience with much power, and from that time he became a new man, and a thorough-going professor of vital Christianity. This was in August 1756.

He himself in after-life referred frequently to the circumstances of his conversion with special thankfulness. He says in 1768: "Strange that I, who had so long sat under the means of grace in England, should be brought nigh to God in an obscure part of Ireland, amidst a handful of God's people met together in a barn, and under the ministry of one who could hardly spell his name! Surely it was the Lord's doing, and is marvellous! The excellency of such power must be of God, and cannot be of man. The regenerating Spirit breathes not only on whom, but likewise when, where, and as he listeth."

Although converted and made a new creature in Christ Jesus, Toplady does not seem to have come to full knowledge of the gospel in all its perfection for at least two years. Like most of God's children, he had to fight his way into full light through many defective opinions, and was only by slow degrees brought to

complete establishment in the faith. His experience in this matter, be it remembered, is only that of the vast majority of true Christians. Like infants, when they are born into the world, God's children are not born again in the full possession of all their spiritual faculties; and it is well and wisely ordered that it is so. What we win easily, we seldom value sufficiently. The very fact that believers have to struggle and fight hard before they get hold of real soundness in the faith, helps to make them prize it more when they have attained it. The truths that cost us a battle are precisely those, which we grasp most firmly, and never let go. Toplady's own account of his early experience on this point is distinct and explicit. He says: "Though awakened in 1756, I was not led into a clear and full view of all the doctrines of grace till the year 1758, when, through the great goodness of God, my Arminian prejudices received an effectual shock in reading Dr. Manton's sermons on the seventeenth chapter of St. John. I shall remember the years 1756 and 1758 with gratitude and joy in the heaven of heavens to all eternity."

In the year 1774, Toplady gave the following curious account of his experience at this period of his life:

"It pleased God to deliver me from the Arminian snare before I was quite eighteen. Up to that period there was not (I confess it with abasement) a more haughty and violent free-willer within the compass of the four seas. One instance of my warm and ignorant zeal occurs now to my memory. About a year before the divine goodness gave me eyes to discern and a heart to embrace the truth, I was haranguing one day in company on the universality of grace and the power of free agency. A good old gentleman, now with God, rose from his chair, and coming to me, held me by one of my coat-buttons, while he mildly said: 'My dear sir, there are marks of spirituality in your conversation, though tinged with an unhappy mixture of pride and self-righteousness. You have been speaking largely in favour of free-will; but from arguments let us come to experience. Do let me ask you one question, How was it with you when the Lord laid hold on you in effectual calling? Had you any hand in obtaining that grace? Nay, would you not have resisted and baffled it, if God's Spirit had left you alone in the hand of your own counsel?' I felt the conclusiveness of these simple but forcible interrogations more strongly than I was then willing to acknowledge. But, blessed be God, I have since been enabled to acknowledge the freeness of His grace, and to sing, what I trust will be my everlasting song, 'Not unto me, Lord, Not unto me; but unto thy name give the glory.'"

From this time to the end of his life, a period of twenty years, Toplady held right onward in his Christian course, and never seems to have swerved or turned aside for a single day. His attachment to Calvinistic views of theology grew with his growth, and strengthened with his strength and undoubtedly made him think too hardly of all who favoured Arminianism. It is more than probable, too, that it gave him the reputation of being a narrow minded and sour divine, and made many keep aloof from him, and depreciate him. But no one ever pretended to doubt his extraordinary devotedness and singleness of eye, or to question his purity and holiness of life. From one cause to another, however, he appears always to have stood alone, and to have had little interchange with his fellow-men. The result was, that throughout life he appears to have been little known and little understood, but most loved where he was most known.

...One would like, furthermore, to know exactly where he began his ministry, and in what parish he was first heard as a preacher of the gospel. But I can find out nothing about these points. One interesting fact about his early preaching, I gather from a curious letter which he wrote to Lady Huntingdon in 1774. In that letter he says:

“As to the doctrines of special and discriminating grace, I have thus much to observe. For the first four years I was in orders, I dwelt chiefly on the outlines of the gospel in this remote corner of my public ministry. I preached of little else but of justification by faith only in the righteousness and atonement of Christ, and of that personal holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. My reasons for thus narrowing the truths of God were these two (I speak it with humiliation and repentance): 1. I thought these points were sufficient to convey as clear an idea as was necessary of salvation; 2. And secondly, I was partly afraid to go any further.

“God himself (for none but he could do it) gradually freed me from that fear. And as he never at any time permitted me to deliver, or even to insinuate anything contradictory to his truth, so has he been graciously pleased, for seven or eight years past, to open my mouth to make known the entire mystery of the gospel, as far as the Spirit has enlightened me into it. The consequence of my first plan of operations was, that the generality of my hearers were pleased, but only few were converted. The result of my latter deliverance from worldly wisdom and worldly fear is, that multitudes have been very angry; but the conversions which God has given me reason to hope he has wrought, have been at least three for one before. Thus I can testify, so far as I have been concerned, the usefulness of preaching predestination; or, in other words, of tracing salvation and redemption to their first source.”

His pen was constantly employed in defence of evangelical religion from the time of his removal to Broad Hembury in 1768. His early habits of study were kept with unabated diligence. No man among the spiritual heroes of last century seems to have read more than he did, or to have had a more extensive knowledge of divinity. His bitterest adversaries in controversy could never deny that he was a scholar, and a ripe one. Indeed, it admits of grave question whether he did shorten his life by his habits of constant study. He says himself, in a letter to a relative, dated March 19, 1775:

“Though I cannot entirely agree with you in supposing that extreme study has been the cause of my late disposition, I must confess that the hill of science, like that of virtue, is in some instances climbed with labour. But when we get a little way up, the lovely prospects which open to the eye make infinite amends for the steepness of the ascent. In short, I am wedded to these pursuits, as a man stipulates to take his wife; viz., for better, for worse, until death do us part. My thirst for knowledge is literally inextinguishable. And if I thus drink myself into a superior world, I cannot help it.”

One feature in Toplady's character, I may here remark, can hardly fail to strike an attentive reader of his remains. That feature is the eminent spirituality of the tone of his religion. There can be no greater mistake than to regard him as a mere student and deep reader, or as a hard and dry controversial divine. Such an estimate of him is thoroughly unjust. His letters and remains supply abundant evidence that he was one who lived in very close communion with God, and had very deep experience of divine things. Living much alone, seldom going into society, and possessing few friends, he was a man little understood by many, who only knew him by his controversial writings, and specially by his unflinching advocacy of Calvinism. Yet really, if the truth be spoken, I can hardly find any man of the last century who seems to have soared so high and aimed so loftily, in his personal dealings with his Saviour, as Toplady. There is an unction and savour about some of his remains, which few of his contemporaries equalled, and none surpassed. I grant freely that he left behind him many things, which cannot be much commended. But he left behind him some things, which will live, as long as English is spoken, in the hearts of all true Christians. His writings contain “thoughts that breathe and words that burn.” And it never ought to be forgotten, that the man who penned them was lying in his grave before he was thirty nine!

The last three years of Toplady's life were spent in London. He removed there by medical advice in the year 1775, under the idea that the moist air of Broad Hembury was injurious to his health. Whether the advice was sound or not may now, perhaps, admit of a question.

At any rate, the change of climate did him no good. Little by little the insidious disease of the chest, under which he laboured, made progress, and wasted his strength. He was certainly able to preach at Orange Street Chapel in the years 1776 and 1777; but it is equally certain that throughout this period he was gradually drawing near to his end. He was never, perhaps, more thoroughly appreciated than he was during than during these last three years of his ministry. A London congregation, such as he had, was able to value gifts and powers which were completely thrown away on a rural parish in Devonshire. His stores of theological reading and distinct doctrinal statement were rightly appraised by his metropolitan hearers. In short, if he had lived longer he might, humanly speaking, have done a mighty work in London. But he who holds the stars in his right hand, and knows best what is good for his Church, saw fit to withdraw him soon from his sphere of usefulness. He seemed as if he came to London only to be known and highly valued, and then to die.

The closing scene of the good man's life was singularly beautiful, and at the same time singularly characteristic. He died as he had lived, in the full hope and peace of the gospel, and with an unwavering confidence in the truth of the doctrines which he had for fifteen years both with his tongue and with his pen. About two months before his death he was greatly pained by hearing that he was reported to have receded from his Calvinistic opinions, and to have expressed a desire to recant them in the presence of Mr. John Wesley. So much was he moved by this rumour, that he resolved to appear before his congregation once more, and to give a public denial to it before he died. His physician in vain remonstrated with him. He was told that it would be dangerous to make the attempt, and that he might probably die in the pulpit. But the vicar of Broad Hembury was not a man to be influenced by such considerations. He replied that "he would rather die in harness than die in the stall." On Sunday, June the 14th, in the last stages of consumption, and only two months before he died, he ascended his pulpit in Orange Street Chapel, after his assistant had preached, to the astonishment of his people, and gave a short but effecting exhortation founded on 2 Pet i. 13, 14: "I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance." He then closed his address with the following remarkable declaration:

" It having been industriously circulated by some malicious and unprincipled persons that during my present long and severe illness I expressed a strong desire of seeing Mr. John Wesley before I die, and revoking some particulars relative to him which occur in my writings, Now I do publicly and most solemnly aver that I have not nor ever had any such intention or desire; and that I most sincerely hope my last hours will be much better employed than in communing with such a man.

So certain and satisfied am I of the truth of all that I have ever written, that were I now sitting up in my dying bed with a pen and ink in my hand, and all the religious and controversial writings I ever published, especially those relating to Mr. John Wesley and the Arminian controversy, whether respecting fact or doctrine, could be at once displayed to my view, I should not strike out a single line relative to him or them.”

The last days of Toplady’s life were spent in great peace. He went down the valley of the shadow of death with abounding consolations, and was enabled to say many edifying things to all around him. The following recollections, jotted down by friends who ministered to him, and communicated to his biographer, can hardly fail to be interesting to a Christian reader.

...“The more his bodily strength was impaired the more vigorous, lively, and rejoicing his mind seemed to be. From the whole turn of his conversation during our interview, he appeared not merely placid and serene, but he evidently possessed the fullest assurance of the most triumphant faith. He repeatedly told me that he had not had the least shadow of a doubt respecting his eternal salvation for near two years past. It is no wonder, therefore, that he so earnestly longed to be dissolved and to be with Christ. His soul seemed to be constantly panting heavenward, and his desire increased the nearer his dissolution approached. A short time before his death, at his request, I felt his pulse, and he desired to know what I thought of it. I told him that his heart and arteries evidently beat almost every day weaker and weaker. He replied immediately, with the sweetest smile on his countenance, ‘Why, that is a good sign that my death is fast approaching; and, blessed be God, I can add that my heart beats every day stronger and stronger for glory.’

“A few days before his dissolution I found him sitting up in his arm-chair, but scarcely able to move or speak. I addressed him very softly, and asked if his consolations continued to abound as they had hitherto done. He quickly replied, ‘O my dear sir, it is impossible to describe how good God is to me. Since I have been sitting in this chair this afternoon I have enjoyed such a season, such sweet communion with God, and such delightful manifestation of his presence with, and love to my soul, that it is impossible for words or any language to express them. I have had peace and joy unutterable, and I fear not but that God’s consolation and support will continue.’ But he immediately recollected himself, and added, ‘What have I said? God may, to be sure, as a sovereign, hide his face and smiles from me; however, I believe he will not; and if he should, yet will I trust him. I know I am safe and secure, for his love and his covenant are everlasting!’”

...Another of his friends, mentioning the report that was spread abroad of his recanting his former principles, he said with some vehemence and emotion, “I recant my former principles? God forbid that I should be so vile an apostate!” To which he presently added, with great apparent humility, “And yet that apostate would I soon be, if I were left to myself.”

Within an hour of his death, he called his friends and his servant to him, and asked them if they could give him up. Upon their answering that they could, since it pleased the Lord to be so gracious to him, he replied: “Oh, what a blessing it is that you are made willing to give me up into the hands of my dear Redeemer, and to part with me! It will not be long before God takes me; for no mortal man can live, after the glories which God has manifested to my soul.” Soon after this he closed his eyes, and quietly fell asleep in Christ on Tuesday, August 11, 1778, in the thirty-eighth year of his age.

...The following passage from Toplady’s last will, made and signed six months before his decease, is so remarkable and characteristic, that I cannot refrain from giving it to my readers:

“I most humbly commit my soul to Almighty God, whom I honour, and have long experienced to be my ever gracious and infinitely merciful Father, Nor have I the least doubt of my election, justification, and eternal happiness, through the riches of his everlasting and unchangeable kindness to me in Christ Jesus, his co-equal Son, my only, my assured, and my all-sufficient Saviour; washed in whose propitiatory blood, and clothed with whose imputed righteousness, I trust to stand perfect, sinless, and complete; and do verily believe that I most certainly shall stand, in the hour of death, and in the kingdom of heaven, and at the last judgement, and in the ultimate state of endless glory. Neither can I write this my last will without rendering the deepest, the most solemn, and the most ardent thanks to the adorable Trinity in Unity, for their eternal, unmerited, irreversible, and inexhaustible love to me a sinner. I bless God the Father for having written from everlasting my unworthy name in the book of life even for appointing me to obtain salvation through Jesus Christ my Lord. I adore God the Son for having vouchsafed to redeem me by his own most precious death, and for having obeyed the whole law for my justification. I admire and revere the gracious benignity of God the Holy Ghost, who converted me to the saving knowledge ‘of Christ more than twenty-two years ago, and whose enlightening, supporting, comforting, and sanctifying agency is, and (I doubt not) will be my strength and song in the hours of my earthly pilgrimage.”

...I will never shrink from saying that the cause for which Toplady contended all his life was decidedly the cause of God's truth. He was a bold defender of Calvinistic views about election, predestination, perseverance, human impotency, and irresistible grace. ...There is only one point about Toplady on which I wish to say something, and that is his character as a hymn-writer. This is a point, I am thankful to say, on which I find no difficulty at all. I give it as my decided opinion that he was one of the best hymn-writers in the English language. I am quite aware that this may seem extravagant praise; but I speak deliberately. I hold that there are no hymns better than his...

Really good hymns are exceedingly rare. There are only a few men in any age who can write them. You may name hundreds of first-rate preachers for one first-rate writer of hymns. Hundreds of so-called hymns fill up our collections of congregational psalmody, which are not really hymns at all. They are very sound, very scriptural, very proper, very correct, very tolerably rhymed; but they are not real, live, genuine hymns. There is no life in them. At best they are tame, pointless, weak, and milk-and-watery.

...Of all the English hymn-writers, none perhaps, have succeeded so thoroughly in combining truth, poetry, life, warmth, fire, solemnity, and unction as Toplady has. I pity the man who does not know, or, knowing, does not admire those glorious hymns of his beginning, "Rock of Ages, cleft for me;" or, "Holy Ghost, dispel our sadness;" or, "A debtor to mercy alone;" or, "Your harps, ye trembling saints;" or, "Christ whose glory fills the skies;" or, "When languor and disease invade;" or, "Deathless principle, arise." The writer of these seven hymns alone has laid the Church under perpetual obligations to him...The only matter of regret is, that the writer of such excellent hymns should have written so few. If he had lived longer, written more hymns, and handled fewer controversies, his memory would have been had in greater honour, and men would have been better pleased.

That hymns of such singular beauty and pathos should have come from the same pen, which indited such bitter controversial writings, is certainly a strange anomaly. I only lay it before my readers as a naked fact. To say the least, it should teach us not to be hasty in censuring a man before we know all sides of his character. The best saints of God are neither so very good, nor the faultiest so very faulty, as they appear. He that only reads Toplady's hymns will find it hard to believe that he could compose his controversial writings. He that only reads his controversial writings will hardly believe that he composed his hymns. Yet the fact remains, that the same man composed both. Alas! The holiest among us all is a very poor mixed creature!

I now leave the subject of this chapter here. I ask my readers to put a favourable construction on Toplady's life, and to judge him with righteous judgement.

I fear he is a man who has never been fairly estimated, and has never had many friends. Ministers of his decidedly, sharp-cut, doctrinal opinions are never very popular. But I plead strongly that Toplady's undeniable faults should never make us forget his equally undeniable excellencies. With all his infirmities, I firmly believe that he was a good man and a great man, and did a work for Christ a hundred years ago, which will never be overthrown. He will stand in his lot at the last day in a high place, when many, perhaps, whom the world liked better shall be put to shame.

<https://www.crichbaptist.org/articles/augustus-toplady/>

The History of the hymn Rock of Ages...

The hymn appeared in its full form in the March issue of *The Gospel Magazine*, 1776 (Fig. 2). Here also, the hymn involves some context. The preceding article, formatted in question-and-answer format and signed "J.F.," dealing with the British national debt, posed the question, "When will the government be able to pay the principal?" A: "When there is more money in England's treasury alone than there is at present in all Europe." Q: "And when will that be?" A: "Never."

What follows is a "Spiritual improvement of the foregoing," from the pen of Augustus Toplady; in a sense, a spiritual application dealing with the debt of humanity against the law of God and the redemption found in Christ. The last question asks, "What return can believers render, to the glorious and gracious Trinity, for mercy and plenteous redemption like this?" The answer:

We can only admire and bless the FATHER, for electing us in Christ, and for laying on Him the iniquities of us all; the SON, for taking our nature and our debts upon himself, and for that complete righteousness and sacrifice, whereby he redeemed his mystic Israel from all their sins; and the co-equal SPIRIT, for causing us (in conversion) to feel our need of Christ, for inspiring us with faith to embrace him, for visiting us with his sweet consolations by shedding abroad his love in our hearts, for sealing us to the day of Christ, and for making us to walk in the path of his commandments.

Then comes the hymn, "A living and dying prayer for the holiest believer in the world," in four stanzas of six lines...

Relevant Scripture passages include the two instances of Moses striking a rock, in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 (1 Corinthians 10:4 relates these events to Christ), the story of Moses hiding in the cleft of the rock in Exodus 33:12–23, and the piercing of Jesus, releasing blood and water, in John 19:34.

The term “Rock of ages” is an alternate translation of Isaiah 26:4 (“everlasting rock”; see also 22:16, 32:1–2, 48:21). The doctrinal basis of having nothing to offer to purchase salvation comes from passages such as Ephesians 2:8–9. The notion of blood having cleansing power can be seen Revelation 7:14 (“They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,” ESV). <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/rock-of-ages-cleft-for-me>

The Commonly Accepted Story of the Hymn’s Origin

Here is the commonly accepted story of how the hymn came to be written:

While walking along the road outside of Blagdon, near the village of Somerset, he was caught in a rapidly approaching thunderstorm, a loud, thundering storm with dangerous lightning. For a brief moment, the lightening showed his escape to safety. It was the rocky landscape of Burrington Combe, complete with crags, cliffs, and caves! Burrington Come climbs 250 feet toward the sky, with the Mendip Heights on one side, and Cheddar Gorge on the other. Anyone who has been caught out in a raging thunderstorm can easily picture the scene. He would have to act fast, as you can imagine the torrents of rain streaming down the cliff-sides.

Quickly, he found a cave ... in the cleft of the rock, and waited the storm out. Augustus knew he had been blessed to find such a hiding place so quickly. While waiting for the storm to pass, he could easily picture the rock being a shelter from the storms of life. He would scribble down the opening lines to the song, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me, Let Me Hide Myself in Thee ... ”



From Banner of Truth...The Origin of Toplady's Rock of Ages

Come with me in your imagination to the Mendip Hills in Somerset. The year is round about 1763 – Toplady was incumbent at Blagdon for two years between June 1762 and June 1764. Toplady is taking a walk in the Mendips, a storm is brewing so he quickens his pace. The clouds gather and the rain begins to fall. It is quite a storm. Toplady hurries along – he is now at the foot of Burrington Coombe, but the rain is falling too heavily for him to carry on his journey. There at the foot of the Coombe on the left-hand side he espies a cleft in the cliff face and here he shelters from the storm. The story goes that he sees a playing card (the six of diamonds), he picks it up and his active mind scribbles the first verse of the hymn that we have come to know and love as the “Rock of Ages”.

Three of Toplady's biographers (Thomas Wright, George Lawton and George Ella) all agree that the story is probably a fable. However, it is based on the possibility, indeed the probability, that he did shelter from a storm in the cleft of a rock at the foot of Burrington Coombe whilst he was walking in the Mendips, and that his active mind meditated upon the subject of the cleft of the rock. The cleft in the rock can still be seen as can a plaque which was placed there in the 1950s.

Whilst the story goes that Toplady composed the hymn whilst he was sheltering from a storm in Burrington Coombe, it is highly likely that the hymn does date from the period that Toplady was incumbent at Blagdon. There are a couple of Toplady's sermons that he preached at this time which make reference to the Rock of Ages. The following quotation comes from his farewell sermon at Blagdon:

If God were to justify and save only those who are pure and upright, heaven would be empty of inhabitants. I say not this to encourage sin; but to encourage those who are grieved for their sins; who fly to the blood of the Cross for pardon, and whose prayer is that they may henceforward be renewed in the spirit of their mind and bring forth acceptable fruit unto God. Let not such be afraid to meet Him: let not such say, “How shall I stand when He appears?” For such have a Foundation to stand upon, a Foundation that cannot fail, even Jesus, the Mediator and Surety of the covenant, Christ, the ROCK OF AGES. He died for such. Their sins which lay like an unsurmountable impediment, or stood like a vast partition wall, and blocked up the passage to eternal life; I say He took the sins of His penitent people out of the way, nailing them to His Cross.

Here is another quotation from Toplady from the same period:

Let even those rugged regions of ignorance and barbarism resound with the high praises of God and of His Christ. . . chiefly may they sing who

inhabit Christ, the spiritual ROCK OF AGES. He is a rock in three ways: as a foundation to support; a shelter to screen; and a fortress to protect. We are apt to build houses of self-righteousness for ourselves; the Lord send you a bill of ejectment and compel you to the Rock.

And again:

The finest sight in the world is a stately ship, lying at anchor, by moonlight in the mouth of the harbour, in a smooth sea, and under the serene sky, waiting for high water to carry it into the haven. Such is the dying Christian at anchor, safely reposed on Christ, the ROCK OF AGES.

But the phrase “Rock of Ages” was one that was familiar to Christian believers of the 18th century and, as George Lawton says, “The expression ‘Rock of Ages’ was idiomatic in evangelical religion, and not specific hymnological utterance. A similar phrase was used by Charles Wesley in one of his Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, which had been published in 1745. It is inconceivable that Toplady was ignorant of this book and that book itself contains a preface extracted from Daniel Brevint’s “The Christian Sacramen”.

Charles Wesley wrote:

“Rock of Israel, cleft for me,
For us, for all mankind,
See, thy feeblest followers see,
Who call thy death to mind:
Sion is the weary land;
Us beneath thy shade receive,
Grant us in the cleft to stand,
And by thy dying live.”

Daniel Brevint wrote:

O Rock of Israel, Rock of Salvation, Rock struck and cleft for me, let those two streams of blood, and water, which once gushed out of thy side, bring down pardon and holiness into my soul; and let me thirst after them now, as if I stood upon the mountain whence sprung this water and near the cleft of that rock, the wounds of my Lord, whence gushed out this sacred blood. All the distance of time and countries between Adam and me doth not keep his sin and punishment from reaching me, any more than if I had been born in his house. Adam from above, let thy blood reach as far, and come as freely to save, and sanctify me, as the blood of my first father did, both to destroy and defile me.

Toplady's hymn first appeared as four lines in an article by Toplady entitled "Life a Journey", which was published in the Gospel Magazine for September 1775 as:

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee!
Foul, I to the fountain fly:
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

The hymn that we sing is largely the same as Toplady composed it. Julian tells us that the text was often altered (probably by editors of hymnbooks to fit their own doctrinal emphases). However, the hymn as we sing it today is by and large the same as written by Toplady...

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Rock of Ages...the hymn

"Be to me a rock of refuge, to which I may continually come; you have given the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress" (Ps. 71:3).

Like most of the metaphors applied to God in Scripture, the idea that our Creator is a rock is multifaceted in its meaning. In addition to informing us of the Lord's stable, unchanging nature (Deut. 32:4), it also tells us about His strength and ability to safeguard His people, much as stone fortifications provide an excellent refuge from the elements and other dangers. This, in fact, is how the metaphor of God as a rock is used in today's passage.

Psalm 71 is an expression of confidence in the ability of our Creator to rescue His people according to the standard of His own righteousness (v. 2). Because the Lord is true to His promises, He must ultimately save His children from all their enemies (Ex. 23:27; Ps. 41:1-2). Certainly, God often intervenes on our behalf to deliver us from our foes when we fail to ask for His assistance, but that does not mean we should take His protection for granted or believe that we need not go before Him in prayer to ask for His help. He delights to hear us confess our reliance on His mighty hand.

Such is the lesson that the psalmist learned over a lifetime of walking with the Lord, for, apparently, the author was an older man when he penned this hymn of praise (Ps. 71:9). If this psalm, as many scholars believe, was written as part of Psalm 70, then the author is David, who knew from experience God's gracious work of protection in many circumstances.

The greatest king of ancient Israel was saved time and again both from external threats and from dangers of his own making (1 Sam. 20; 2 Sam. 13–18).

Finally, we note that the people of God need protection not only from foes, both human and demonic, but also from the Lord Himself. Born into this world as sons and daughters of Adam, we deserve the righteous wrath of the one, true, holy God (Rom. 5:12–21). The only way to escape this wrath is to find shelter in the only one who can save us from God, namely, God Himself (1 Thess. 1:9–10). We find this protection in Jesus Christ alone, the incarnate Son of God, who bore His Father’s wrath on behalf of His people, that they might enjoy the benefit of eternal life. Like the famous hymn writer Augustus Toplady, we all must confess to Him: “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.”

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/rock-ages/>

Rock of Ages: The Double Cure

Christ being compared to a rock was not a new thing in Augustus Montague Toplady’s time. Its allusion goes all the way back to where Moses, at God’s command, struck the rock in Horeb, miraculously bringing forth a needed supply of water for God’s people (Exodus 17:6). The rock that Moses struck is a picture of Jesus being struck to provide the “water” needed to satisfy sinful man’s spiritual need. The Apostle Paul confirms this allusion:

- *For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. – 1 Corinthians 10:4*

The title of this hymn, and verse one specifically, paint the picture of Jesus as a rock split open (cleft) to provide a place of spiritual refuge for sinful people. The inference is drawn from Moses’ encounter with God in Exodus 33:20-23. Because Moses, a fallen man, could not see God’s face and still live, God protected Moses by placing him in the cleft of a rock as He passed by. In the same way, by being hidden in Christ, the Rock cleft on his behalf at the cross, the believer is sheltered from the eternal death he would face when he stands before a holy, righteous God.

In addition to the allusion of Christ as the Rock of Ages, verse one also presents us with a rich picture of God’s grace and goodness in the Gospel. The Bible says that we are a people who are sick unto death, and in desperate need of a cure. Our sin is like a cancer that has eaten away our soul from the inside out. Left to ourselves, the prognosis is simple: Death.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Romans 6:23

But in *Rock of Ages*, we sing of a cure. A cure for the guilt of our sin that incurs the devastating and holy wrath of God on the one hand, and a cure from the power of sin over our hearts on the other. In the person of Jesus Christ, we have both forgiveness and purity. In his essay entitled *On the Biblical Notion of Renewal*, theologian B. B. Warfield goes on to state:

It is uniformly taught in Scripture that by his sin man has not merely incurred the divine condemnation but also corrupted his own heart; that sin, in other words, is not merely guilt deserving wrath, but depravity: and that there is needed for man's recovery from sin, therefore, not merely atonement but renewal; (a double cure) that salvation...consists not merely in pardon but in purification. Great as the stress laid in the Scriptures on the forgiveness of sins as the root of salvation, no less stress is laid throughout the Scriptures on the cleansing of the heart as the fruit of salvation. Nowhere is the sinner permitted to rest satisfied with the pardon as the end of salvation; everywhere he is made poignantly to feel that salvation is realized only in a clean heart and a right spirit.

We sing of the Gospel not only as a sanctuary where the guilty hell-deserving sinner may flee to escape the “wrath of a sin-hating God,” but a place of cleansing; so that we are not only saved from the penalty of sin, but are being cleansed from the power of sin. Not only justified, but also sanctified. Not only forgiven by the great Judge of all the earth, but attended to by the Great Physician of our souls. In the cleft of the Rock, which is Christ the Lord, there is, indeed, a “double cure” for all ills.

<https://redemptionhill.com/rock-of-ages-the-double-cure/>

The Theology of Rock of Ages

When the Holy Spirit regenerates a man and joins him to Christ, He shows him the heinousness of his sin. Seeing he cannot save himself from it, the sinner appeals to Christ to deliver him both from 1) sin's guilt and 2) from its power; from God's wrath and from sin's bondage; to not only justify him, but to sanctify him --- to apply the double cure. Christ did not die for our sin so we could have peace with sin but so that we would go to war with sin. No regenerate man says 'Lord forgive my guilt but leave me in my bondage to my sin.' No, by the grace of God, he flees from sin to Christ for salvation - salvation from God's wrath as well as deliverance from our sinful self, for the power of the Spirit to put off sin. So unlike some modern teaching, salvation does not merely consist of being delivered from God's wrath but includes much more.

Many in the justification-only crowd and some liberal theologians have used this theology as an excuse to live in sin. But as J. I. Packer once said, "A half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth."

That is why those who teach that in the Christian life we need not yield to Him as Lord but only as Savior, have misunderstood that when we appeal to Him to rescue us from sin's captivity as Savior we are, in fact, yielding to Him as Lord. Remember, Christ does not save us 'in our sins' but "from our sins" (Matt 1:21); from sin's captivity over us. He came not only to forgive sins but to liberate the captives from it (Luke 4:18). Does that mean that we will be without sin or that if we are not doing well enough we have to begin to worry about our salvation? No, on the contrary, as John MacArthur wisely points out, "if we could lose our salvation, we would." It is not about perfection but direction -- the grace of the Holy Spirit which has given us a new heart with new dispositions, changes the direction of our thinking, changes our desires so we now want to be free from the shackles of the world, the flesh and the devil. No one who is regenerate will be at peace with sin. The fact that you struggle with sin and worry about it reveals that the Spirit is at work in you. It means that the new principle of grace inside us makes us mourn over sin and so we appeal for God's help to overcome it. And with God's help it is not burdensome because we have been born again (1 John 5:2-4).

The scripture declares that the unregenerate man love darkness, hates the light and will not come into the light (John 3:19) Conversely, those who are born from above have been granted a new disposition which hates darkness, loves the light and so willingly and voluntarily comes into the light.

John Calvin speaking of these different aspects of salvation said,

"Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life." - John Calvin (Inst. III.11.1)

The double cure is reconciliation to God through Christ and includes both justification and sanctification. Calvin further clarifies,

"Now if it is true - a fact abundantly clear - that the whole of the gospel is contained under these two headings, repentance and forgiveness of sins, do we not see that the Lord freely justifies his own in order that he may at the same time restore them to true righteousness by sanctification of his

Spirit? Since both kinds of grace are received by faith, as I have elsewhere proved, still because the proper object of faith is God's goodness, by which sins are forgiven, it was expedient that it should be carefully distinguished from repentance." (Inst. III.3.19)

Salvation is multifaceted. Many today view salvation solely as justification and ignore the Scriptures teaching on other benefits of our union with Christ -- such as the benefits of regeneration and sanctification. Justification and sanctification are clearly distinct works of grace, but ought not to be separated. Each depends on our union with Christ. Both blessings are critical to our salvation and are experienced by, not some, but all Christians. In Calvin's own words:

Since faith embraces Christ, as offered to us by the Father [cf. John 6:29] -- that is, since he is offered not only for righteousness, forgiveness of sins, and peace, but also for sanctification [cf. 1 Cor. 1:30] and the fountain of the water of life [John 7:38; cf. ch. 4:14] -- without a doubt, no one can duly know him without at the same time apprehending the sanctification of the Spirit. Or, if anyone desires some plainer statement, faith rests upon the knowledge of Christ. And Christ cannot be known apart from the sanctification of his Spirit. It follows that faith can in no wise be separated from a devout disposition. (Inst. III.II.8)

Christ is both our justification and sanctification. Our obedience flows from the cross, it does not contribute to it.... It is a fruit of our union with Christ not the root. It all points to Christ and not to us.

In the famous Hymn, Rock of Ages, Augustus Toplady gives us the same kind of sound theology from the Scripture and perhaps had in mind Calvin's use of the phrase "double grace" when writing it:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee; Let the water and the blood, From thy wounded side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure, Save from wrath and make me pure. - Augustus Toplady

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. (Rom. 6:11-13)

<https://www.monergism.com/blog/double-cure>

From HymnStudies blog...

I. The 1st stanza says that Christ is our Rock

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure, Save from wrath and make me pure."

A. Jesus Christ is the Rock of Ages who was cleft for us, in whom we can hide, and from whom we receive the living water: 1 Cor. 10.1-4

B. As the rock who was cleft for us, blood and water flowed from His wounded side; the original read "riven side," but the meaning is the same: Jn. 19.33-34

C. This sacrificial death of Christ is of sin the double cure; the original read, "Cleanse me from its guilt and power," but either way the point is that the blood of Christ is able both to forgive us of our sins and then to break sin's power that we might be kept pure: Rom. 6.7-9

II. The 2nd stanza says that Jesus, as our Rock, is the only means of salvation

"Could my tears forever flow, Could my zeal no languor know,
These for sin could not atone, Thou must save, and Thou alone;
In my hand no price I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling."

A. Certainly, we need to have tears for sin and zeal that knows no languor (the original read "no respite know") in coming to and serving Christ: 2 Cor. 7.10, Rev. 3.19

B. However, these (the original read "All for sin") cannot atone for our sin; Christ alone is the living stone to whom we must come for salvation: 1 Pet. 2.4-10

C. Therefore, there is no price that we can bring (the original read, "Nothing in my hand I bring"); we can only cling to the cross because it represents God's means to save us: 1 Cor. 1.18-21

III. The third stanza says that this Rock is our source of help

"Not the labor of my hands Can fulfil the law's demands;
Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Vile, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die."

A. The labor of our hands can never fulfil the law's demands because we simply cannot do enough good works to atone for our sins: Tit. 3.5

B. Thus, we must look to God for the grace that we need to be saved: Eph. 2.8-9

C. Because we are vile (the original read "foul"), we must in our helplessness look to Christ as the fountain to wash away sins or we shall surely die (some books read "ere I die"), just as the Psalmist looked to the Lord as His rock of refuge: Ps. 31.1-2

IV. The final stanza says that because of our Rock we have hope for the future
"While I draw this fleeting breath, When my eye lids (or eyes shall) close in death,
When I rise to worlds unknown, And behold Thee on Thy throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee."

A. Someday we shall cease to draw this fleeting breath (the original read "Whilst"), and then our eyes shall close in death (the original read "eye-strings break;" some books read "eye-lids close"): Heb. 9.27

B. After that, we shall rise to worlds unknown (the original read, "Soar through tracts unknown") and eventually behold Christ on His throne (the original read, "See Thee on Thy judgment throne"). In *Sacred Selections*, Ellis J. Crum changed it to "And behold GOD on the throne," evidently thinking for some reason that after the second coming Christ will no longer be on the throne. But Jesus Himself said that when He comes He will sit on His throne of judgment: Matt. 25.31

C. And when we stand before Him, we can extol Him as the Rock of Ages who will redeem us eternally: Ps. 78.35.

CONCL.: In Exo. 17.1-6, when the Israelites were thirsty in the wilderness, God told Moses to strike the rock, from which water flowed. In like manner, Christ is a cleft rock out of whom flow the waters of salvation. We can find encouragement as we praise the Lord for His great gift of redemption and for His provision of refuge for us as our "Rock of Ages."

<https://hymnstudiesblog.wordpress.com>

A Debtor to Mercy Alone

As Toplady himself defined it in a collection of *‘Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship’* (published in 1776), this particular hymn is intended to speak about *‘Assurance of Faith’*.

Augustus Toplady lived in a day when the truths expressed in the above hymn were more readily believed by many in the Church of England, and by Christians in general. May God be pleased to grant us such a day again. The doctrine contained in this hymn is pure gold, confirming the mercy of God in our salvation, and emphasising by the grace of God those who have been truly converted will endure to the end, and most certainly cannot be lost.

<https://www.crichbaptist.org/articles/christian-poetry-hymns/poems-hymns/a-debtor-to-mercy-alone/>

Original Trinity Hymnal, #99

A debtor to mercy alone,
Of covenant mercy I sing;
Nor fear, with thy righteousness on,
My person and offering to bring.
The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Saviour's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.

The work which his goodness began,
The arm of his strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen,
And never was forfeited yet.
Things future, nor things that are now,
Nor all things below or above,
Can make him his purpose forgo,
Or sever my soul from his love.

My name from the palms of his hands
Eternity will not erase;
Impressed on his heart it remains,
In marks of indelible grace.
Yes, I to the end shall endure,
As sure as the earnest is given;
More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heav'n.

Before the Throne of God Above

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea
A great High Priest whose name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me
My name is graven on His hands
My name is written on His heart
I know that while in heaven He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart
No tongue can bid me thence depart