

Then Sings My Soul 8 **“Rock of Ages”**

On November 4, 1740, a baby in Farnham, England, was given the formidable name of Augustus Montague Toplady. His father died in a war, his mother spoiled him, and his friends thought him “sick and neurotic,” and his relatives disliked him.

But Augustus was interested in the Lord. “I am now arrived at the age of eleven years,” he wrote on his birthday. “I praise God I can remember no dreadful crime; to the Lord be the glory.” By age 12 he was preaching sermons to whoever would listen. At 14 he began writing hymns. At 16 he was soundly converted to Christ while attending a service in a barn. And at 22 he was ordained an Anglican priest.

While visiting across his parish late one afternoon, a large thunderstorm quickly overcame him and forced him off the road into the crevice of a large rock formation called Cheddar Gorge. While standing in the rock, Ps. 94:22 kept running through his mind.

But the Lord is my fortress; my God is the mighty rock where I hide.
Ps. 94:22

Frantic for a piece of paper, he picked up a plain playing card from the ground, and began scribbling the words flooding his mind:

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.

Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law’s demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.

While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyes shall close in death, when I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne, Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

As a staunch Predestination Calvinist, Augustus Toplady despised John Wesley and his Arminian theology of grace and faith-based salvation. He often bitterly attacked the great Methodist leader. "I believe him to be the most rancorous hater of the gospel-system that ever appeared on this island." Augustus wrote. "Wesley is guilty of satanic shamelessness," he said on another occasion, "of acting the ignoble part of a lurking, shy assassin."

In 1776 Augustus wrote an article about God's forgiveness, intending it as a slap at Wesley. He ended his article with his original poem: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee"

Augustus Toplady died at age 38, but his poem outlived him and has been called "the best known, best loved, and most widely useful" hymn in the English language. Oddly, it is remarkably similar to something Wesley had written 30 years before in the preface of a book of hymns for the Lord's Supper: "O Rock of Salvation, Rock struck and cleft for me, let those two Streams of Blood and Water which gushed from thy side, bring down Pardon and Holiness into my soul." Perhaps the two men were not as incompatible as they thought.

I want to focus us today on one phrase from Toplady's hymn and one from the quote from John Wesley, because both say the same thing. "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." And from Wesley's preface to his hymnal: "Let those two streams of blood and water which gushed from thy side bring down pardon and holiness into my soul." There are two parts to being forgiven; 'saved from wrath and made pure'; there are two results of being forgiven; 'pardon and holiness'. I wish to utilize two favorite bible stories to illustrate the point of these two truths today.

1. WHERE DO YOU HIDE WHEN YOU ARE SEEKING GOD? (Confession)

Both Toplady and Wesley understood, in spite of their different approaches, that each human being stands before God, as a sinner. They knew and preached that each person must seek from God; forgiveness, pardon, justification for our numerous and often repeated sins. Unfortunately we are not so quick to acknowledge our same sinful reality today.

There is a story in the OT of Moses having a discussion with God. God has called and led Moses to lead the people out of Egypt. Moses hesitantly agrees, and when the journey takes them to the Mount called Sinai, the people grow restless and grumbling. Moses seeks God's advice, God's intervention on their behalf. God gives to Moses the divinely inspired Ten Commandments written in stone by the finger of God. Moses wants more; Moses wants to see God face to face. Here is the rest of the story:

Moses responded, "then show me your glorious presence." The Lord replied, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will call out my name, Yahweh, before you. For I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose. But you may not look directly at my face, for no one may see me and live." The Lord continued, "look, stand near me on this rock. As my glorious presence passes by, I will hide you in the crevice of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and let you see me from behind. But my face will not be seen. Exodus 33: 18-23

I don't know all the reasons God was hesitant for Moses to see his face, it may have had to do with the timing, it more likely had to do with the peoples sins; I'm not sure. What I do know is that God wants nothing more from us today than to know and be known face to face! God wants us to seek Him, but our sins often forbid us. God hides us in the cleft of the Rock while forgiveness is extended and accepted.

The first act of forgiveness is confession, and the second like it; repentance we'll discuss in a moment. Confession means we admit our sinfulness, and ask for mercy; repentance means we change our ways.

Until we have asked God for forgiveness and received this gift, the face of God would undo us; the judgment of God would kill us. It's a good thing God's preveniant provision includes a crevice in the Rock of judgment that keeps us alive until we settle this first act of forgiveness. Have you been forgiven today? Have you settled the issue? If so, then hang on for part two. If not, do it now...ask God to forgive your sins, name them one by one, ask God to bring them to your memory, and take them away from your record. The first step Wesley and Toplady agreed needed to happen was for each human being to be forgiven by the blood of Jesus Christ. So where do you hide while seeking God's forgiveness...in the cleft of His Rock.

2. WHERE DO YOU HIDE WHEN GOD IS SEEKING YOU? (Repentance)

After we are forgiven, God comes seeking us to help Him. The second part of being forgiven involves being changed, becoming a servant. The first part, confession is essential and necessary, but not the end of the story. Many people have been forgiven, but many have also failed to go on from there. Many people relish in the joy of God's grace, mercy and technical forgiveness, but many also fail to read the rest of the story.

Many people love the story of the women caught in adultery being forgiven by Jesus, but leave out the last line: "GO and sin no more." You see, once we have been forgiven, we must become servants. Making our confession is an internal action, beginning repentance is quite external. Repentance literally means changing our ways, turning a u-turn. Many people miss this; rejoicing they have received God's mercy, but never making any effort to be changed in their life, or priorities, or decisions. "Be of sin the double cure...saved from wrath and made pure." "Pardon and Holiness."

Wesley, better than anyone understood exactly this truth, that salvation was only half complete until the saved were enlisted in living out that salvation. His concept was simply that there was no holiness except social holiness.

He condemned his followers who ended their experience with Christ at some altar, instead favoring those who worked out their salvation in the streets and byways, in the schools and hospitals, and orphanages, in the coal mines and barrooms. It might be too strong, but I'm going to say it anyway. If your salvation is only technical and not practical...then I wonder if you have really been saved. Our good works don't save us, they demonstrate that we are saved! The great condemnation at the corner of contemporary church and modern culture; is that church is a building where some people gather to pat each other on the back for suffering for Jesus; when in reality, nothing much is being done to share the gospel, to live out Jesus' lifestyle, to change the world in the name of Jesus, for God's sake! It must not be so among us! Our salvation must be translated into the way we live. We don't live our own lives after forgiveness; the life we now live is Christ's life, lived through each of us.

There is another favorite story in the OT. This time Elijah, one of only a handful of faithful prophets of God is dramatically used by God to destroy some false prophets of Baal. On Mt. Carmel off the Mediterranean coast line, God instructs Elijah to stage a contest between himself and the 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah complies, and wins, embarrassing the false Baal prophets; ending with their slaughter at the River Kishon.

Immediately after this dramatic event Elijah runs away from a rumor that the Queen, who heard of this demonstration and seeks to kill Elijah. So off to the mountains he runs; tail between his legs. How can one face down the public ridicule of a Fire and Brimstone demonstration with 450 prophets of Baal, then cower at the rumor of one woman's scorn? Here is the rest of the story:

Elijah replied, "I have zealously served the Lord God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too."

“Go out and stand before me on the mountain.” The Lord told him. And as Elijah stood there, the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. I Kings 19: 10-13

As if to say...here I am Lord, I've heard your still small voice...send me...again!

Do you see the connection? Moses in the cleft of the Rock on Mt Sinai while seeking God's forgiveness for God's people. Elijah in a cave in the Rocks while God seeks him to get back in the battle.

It is fine to seek God's forgiveness...in fact it is essentially necessary, or necessarily essential. WE MUST BE FORGIVEN. But then...we must get to work. Our salvation is only half good if all we do is get forgiven. If all God's forgiveness does is change our destination after we die, then we are missing half the truth, half the blessing, half the life! Our salvation must be played out each day in the ways we deal with people, in the ways we spend our money, in the ways we conduct our business, in the ways we treat our loved ones, in the ways we serve the poor, in the ways we make decisions, in the ways we encounter the world. My friends, John Wesley and Augustus Toplady may have been theological adversaries, but they were agreed on this: “saved from wrath and make me pure.” “Pardon from sin and made Holy.” Will you agree? If not, then you have to stop singing this song, or be a hypocrite. If so, then let your life reflect your love for God, and your faith in Jesus Christ, and your reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit...and go make the world...different! AMEN.