

“Rock of Ages”

A Sermon for the Season of Lent

This is a favorite hymn about “the rock,” written by Augustus Toplady in the 1700’s. What a name, Toplady. Obviously from England. Why is this such a favorite hymn? It has both a lovely tune and great imagery.

The rock is a well-known image in Scripture. Isaiah 28:16: “Thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation. He who believes will not be in haste.’”

That verse is quoted in Romans 9:33, 1 Peter 2:6, and is also behind other things. When it says in 1 Cor 3:11: “There is no other foundation,” it is obviously referring to this imagery. We know from manuscripts which aren’t Biblical that they collected all kinds of lists of verses about the rock, the foundation.

We know that there are other places that talk about the foundation as in Eph 2:20: “Built on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, Christ himself being the cornerstone.” Jesus is the cornerstone. Of course, the cornerstone is mentioned in Isaiah also. And in Revelation 21 we see the new Jerusalem with the twelve foundations really referring to the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. In this case Jesus is the light that takes the place of the temple.

Of course there is Matthew 16:18 about Peter, the rock, or Rocky. If you take that verse: “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church” and you translate it back into Aramaic, the language which Jesus spoke, then it is very clear that it says: “You are rock and on this rock I will build my church.” The same word “Cephas” is used both times, and there’s no question that it means Peter.

There are those who say it does not mean Peter; it means the confession he made.

Then there are others who say that Jesus said to Peter: “You are Peter,” and then Jesus pointed to himself and said, “And upon this rock” I will build my church. But there’s no basis for that in the text at all.

A few verses later Jesus said to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hinderance to me.” And Peter denied Jesus three times.

It’s obvious that what is meant when Peter is called “the rock” is that he’s the rock when he is confessing Christ. When he’s not confessing Christ, he is pretty rocky.

Back to “Rock of Ages.” Hebrews 13:8 states: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” There is that which is the unshakeable basis for our Christian faith. In that lovely hymn, “Abide with me,” there is that verse: “Change and decay in all around I see, O thou who changest not, abide with me.” He is the one who changes not, who is the basis we can depend upon.

In writing "Rock of Ages," the poet, Toplady, has written a very complicated hymn for us. It says "Rock of Ages, cleft for me." The rock is broken; it's cut in two—cleft for me! This is obviously referring to the crucifixion. This foundation that can't be shaken is broken.

What's this referring to? This refers to Matthew 27:41 and 28:2, which point out that there was an earthquake and everything shook, the veil of the temple split. The poet is thinking of that.

And then the poet says: "Let me hid myself in thee." Where's that image from? It goes back to the second giving of the Ten Commandments. You recall in Exodus 33, it talks about the fact Moses wanted to see God and God said (paraphrase): "No you can't see God and live, but if you hide in the cleft of the rock, I'll put my hand over you to protect you and after I've gone by, I'll let you look at my back. You can hide in the cleft."

There it is a kind of playing with imagery, hiding from God (Adam and Eve), and in the hymn, it is hiding in him. It's a complicated use of imagery here.

Then: "Let the water and the blood from thy riven side which flowed." That's referring to John 19:34 which says when he was crucified, they pierced his side with a spear and water and blood both came out. There's a lot of discussion as to what that is about, but this is what the poet was referring to with language "from thy riven side."

Then: "Be of sin the double cure." What is a double cure? You have to go to the end of the line where it says: "Cleanse me from its guilt and power." Double cure means it cures both the guilt and the power of sin.

Verse two is right out of Paul: "Not the labors of my hands can fulfill the laws demands." That's straight Paul.

"Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow? All for sin could not atone, Thou must save and thou alone." It's about as straight out of Paul as you can get.

Remember how Luther tried and tried to earn God's favor. If anybody had zeal it was him. He was a monk who did everything possible. But, as the hymn says: "Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow." None of this would do any good.

And in February 1546 when Luther died, they found in his clothes a slip of paper which he had left there which said: "We are beggars this is true." We are all beggars before God.

And that leads us to the next verse:

"Nothing in my hand I bring; Simply to thy cross I cling." This image is sort of a problem, which you can see by looking at the rest of the verse: "Naked, come to thee for dress, Helpless, look to thee for grace; Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die."

The problem with: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling," is that when you come down to it, I don't cling to the cross; he clings to me. I do not go to him; he comes and covers me. I don't look to him; he comes and washes me.

A pastor tells of being a child and present when his grandfather stood up at a family gathering and said: "I thank my Lord that he has made and washed me in the blood of the Lamb."

Many years later the pastor happened upon that verse, Rev 7:13-14, where it says: "Who are these people in white robes? These are they . . . who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

He noted that his grandfather had, without knowing, altered the text in a good way. He said: "He has washed my robe . . ." He is the one who washes us, rather than we have done it. The third verse of "Rock of Ages" picks up this imagery.

There are problems with the Book of Revelation and not only in chapter six where the saints are under the altar cursing their enemies.

There is also a problem with the image in Revelation 3:20: "Behold I stand at the door and knock: if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come to him . . ."

There is a famous painting by William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) of this image. The door has no handle on the outside, the implication being that the only handle is on the inside, and the implication of that being that you have to open the door.

That's simply not right. We have to correct the Book of Revelation, and be aware of the fact that the painting, which correctly reflects the verse, is not what it's about. We do not open the door. He is the one who comes and overcomes our rebellion and makes us his own.

That's the difference between what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about rather than other things that have gone the wrong way.

That's the remarkable thing about this third verse of 'Rock of Ages.' It starts out: "Nothing in my hand," and ends with "Wash me Savior or I die." He has to do the washing. And in between there's this little bit of complexity. Some fancy things happen. We sing it, and we don't think about it, but there is something basic at stake here.

He has washed our robes for us and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Then it concludes: "While I draw this fleeting breathe, When mine eyelids 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."

This is a kind of dedication when one thinks of what life is about. "When mine eyelids close in death . . . Let me hide myself in thee." Yet it's not up to us to do it right. He is the one who hides us in him.

That's important to keep in the right framework because we want to use hymns that point us to Christ so that we keep it straight that it's not the labor of our hands, but "Thou must save and Thou alone." And this is what he does. Amen.