

## April Hymn of the Month

*Just as picturesque scenes can bring peace and calmness to the soul, so does beautiful music*



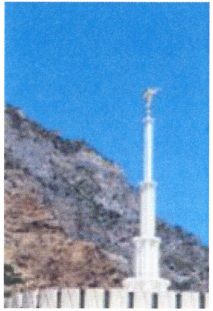
["Rock of Ages" Piano solo with Orchestration by Larry Beebe](#)



["Rock of Ages" Ring Tone](#)

[Piano Solo from Testimony of Faith Vol 1 - LM3034](#) / [SATB with Organ Accompaniment - LM1073](#)

### The Hymn



The message of this hymn is a fitting match for the Easter season as its poetic language refers to the Savior's roles as mediator and redeemer for all who have ever lived. One of the most enduringly popular Christian hymns, the text for "Rock of Ages" was written in the eighteenth century, around 1770. Some twenty-first

century readers may have difficulty relating to its style, however, this text not only presents a glimpse of the beliefs and thoughts of a previous century, but points to enduring truths relevant to the present. Although evidence indicates that the text has been altered with substitutions by others since it was first written, the essential message remains unchanged.

The first two lines of the text, "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee," are repeated at the end of the piece and are in a more metaphorical style than the other lines; this emphasis deserves a closer look.

The Savior is referred to many times in the scriptures as "my rock," "the rock of my refuge" and "the rock of my salvation." The word 'rock' in this sense meaning 'something like a rock in firmness,' a 'foundation or support.' The Savior is literally the foundation of the world, as John stated in the Bible, "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made." He is also a figurative foundation upon whose teachings and gospel we can confidently build our mortal lives and our hopes of eternal life.

The term "ages" can have several meanings in this context, 'a period of history,' 'generation,' 'lifetime,' or, 'one of the stages of life.'

The first phrase of the first line, "Rock of ages," can be therefore interpreted differently by different people. Such as: Jesus is the Creator of the world, and the Savior for all people who have ever lived; or, the solid, unchanging gospel of the Savior and the presence of his spirit has guided and protected generations before; or, I can depend on the Lord to guide me through every stage of life.

Likewise, the second phrase, "cleft for me" can be interpreted in different ways. To some it may bring a hope of similar personal protection as with the Biblical account in the book of Exodus where

### The Author



*The Author, Augustus Montague Toplady*, was born to Richard and Catherine Toplady at Farnham, England, in 1740. His father was a major in the British army and his mother was the daughter of a clergyman. Farnham is about 40 miles southwest of London.

Unfortunately, Augustus never knew his father, as he is believed to have succumbed to yellow fever while serving under his friend Admiral Vernon at the siege of Cartagena that same year. (Cartagena is in modern day Colombia, South America).

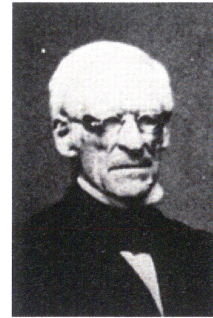
An only child, an older brother having died in infancy, young Augustus was raised by his doting mother, with assistance from her brother, Rev. Julius Bate.

Augustus was said to be delicate, high spirited and precocious as a child. His mother removed to Westminster and entered her son at Westminster school at the age of nine or ten. At about eleven, Augustus began keeping a diary, and by the age of fourteen had written sermons, essays and entertainments (plays) and began writing hymns.

About a year later, in 1755, Augustus left school and accompanied his mother to Ireland where she owned an estate at Wexford and needed to settle some affairs. He was entered at Trinity College, Dublin, that year.

Although raised in a religious atmosphere, Augustus is said to have become unusually serious at this time, and while visiting his mother at Wexford in 1756 was brought by curiosity to a revivalist meeting where he had a spiritual awakening while listening to the preacher's message based on Ephesians 2:13.

### The Composer



*The Composer, Thomas Hastings*, was born at Washington, Connecticut, in October of 1784, the third of eleven children. His father, Dr. Seth Hastings, moved the family to Clinton, New York in 1786. Clinton today is a small town about nine miles southwest of Utica. In

1786 it was a frontier village and it is said that young Thomas had few opportunities for formal education. His talent and taste for music became apparent at an early age, however, and by the age of twenty-two he was teaching music. He married Mary Seymour of Buffalo. In 1817, it is said he went to Troy to pursue better opportunities, then to Albany and Utica. It is reported that he was a prominent member of the Presbyterian Church and while in Utica spent nine years as editor of a religious weekly journal, in which he was able to put forward his views on church music.

In 1832, it is said that he was called to New York to take charge of several church choirs, and he spent his remaining years there. In 1858, it is reported that the University of the City of New York (now known as New York University) awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Music, believed to be one of the first such awarded.

Thomas Hastings is said to have believed that better musical worship gave greater glory to God and worked diligently training choirs, writing and composing, compiling and publishing.

His known hymn texts today are reported to number about 180 and his hymn tunes number over 40, including the tune for "Rock of Ages." Some biographers claim that he wrote texts for about six hundred hymns and composed a thousand tunes over his lifetime. He published a number of collections, one of which was said to be a collaboration with Lowell Mason. His contributions to sacred music are even more



Moses is placed in "a cleft of the rock," and covered with the Lord's hand for protection from His glory while he passed by. Others may interpret this phrase figuratively as the Lord opening His heart and there being a space there for each of us. Still others may understand that the definition of "cleft" which means 'to divide by a cutting blow' points to the Crucifixion of the Savior and the spear wound He received, dying for all. The text of the third and fourth lines gives emphasis to this meaning.

The text of the second line brings the question, what do we need the Savior to hide us from? The last line of the first verse has an answer of particular priority, the wrath of God for disobedience and sin, and His subsequent justice. The Savior's role as mediator between mankind and our Heavenly Father addresses this very issue and is a core doctrine of Christianity. The remainder of the verse refers to the sacrifice of the sinless Savior by which he is able to offer himself as atonement for the sins of those who believe on him and repent.

The second verse beautifully describes our dependence on the Savior for our eternal salvation. His grace is necessary in addition to all we can do.

The last verse reminds us of the brevity of mortal life and provides a vision of what lies beyond, describing our need for the Savior both here and there.

Four of the lines of "Rock of Ages" are said to have first appeared as accompaniment to an essay by the author, "Life a Journey" published in 1775 in 'The Gospel Magazine' of The Church of England.

It is reported that the full hymn text was first published in the same magazine the subsequent year, 1776. The hymn author, Augustus Toplady, was serving as the magazine editor at the time. The poem concluded an article penned by Toplady wherein he compared calculation of the national debt to calculation of the number of sins a person could accrue and the need for, and praise of the Savior for taking our debts upon himself. The poem was titled, "A living and dying Prayer for the Holiest Believer in the World." Many hymnologists believe that the article and hymn were written as part of an ongoing doctrinal dispute between Augustus Toplady and John (or Charles) Wesley. Although both were Anglican clerics, Toplady is said to have been a Calvinist who believed in predestination and unconditional election, while Wesley was one of the founders of Methodism who believed in free will and conditional election. From records of their writings it appears that they sometimes copied the other's words in their rebuttals, and some believe that the title and a number of the lines of "Rock of Ages" were plagiarized from a hymn understood to have been written by Charles Wesley and published in a 1745 hymnal: "Rock of Israel, cleft for me."

There exists a more romantic account that the words of "Rock of Ages" came to the author's mind as the young cleric sheltered from a thunderstorm in a rock crevice in the narrow valley of Burrington Combe near the village of Blagdon in Somerset where he lived for a time.

This legend is largely dismissed by hymnologists, however, most legends have some basis in fact. One biographer records that Toplady used the term "Rock of Ages" in his farewell sermon at Blagdon, Easter Sunday, April 22, 1764, and was known to hold back his writings for years.

Although it is said that the story of the thunderstorm became popular after the author's death, it is not impossible that the thunderstorm situation occurred, given the rainy climate of the area and the remarkable huge cloven rock which is one of the sights of the neighborhood. The young Toplady may have been familiar with Wesley's hymn and may have had the opening line brought to mind by his situation in the storm. It could then have become a catalyst for expression of his faith and feelings. He would not be the only

He had always intended to be a minister and he then began to study the doctrines of the Church of England and the dissenting churches.

At first he sided with the Wesleys and the Arminian position, but at about eighteen became convinced of Calvinism which he never afterward wearied of upholding. His enthusiasm expressed itself in poetry and in 1759 at the age of nineteen he published at Dublin a volume of poetry titled: "Poems on Sacred Subjects."

In June of 1762, Augustus Toplady was ordained deacon in the Church of England and went to the Somerset village of Blagdon to serve as curate (or assistant clergyman) to the Reverend Lupton. During his time there it is believed that he wrote or began the text for "Rock of Ages." He served there until 1764, when at the age of 24 he proceeded to short appointments in London and Farley Hungerford, then to Harford and Fen Ottery, and then to Broad Hembury in 1768. Augustus wrote a number of published articles, sermons and books during his ministry and carried on a passionate debate with John Wesley through a number of them. He also wrote many hymns which were published in the "The Gospel Magazine" beginning in 1771 and in his own collection, "Psalms and Hymns," published in 1776.

Augustus Toplady was said to be both tempestuous and one of the most polished and courteous gentlemen of his day. Although he never married, he had many friends. Suffering from tuberculosis, his health declined, but he found great joy in his faith and expressed eagerness for Jesus to come and take him. He passed away in August of 1778 at the age of 38 and per his request his funeral had no "fopperies."

The hymn for which he is remembered has appealed to Christians of many denominations through the ensuing years and continues today.

### ***"Rock of Ages"***

Text as originally published, compared to that in the 1985 LDS Hymnal in parentheses.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in thee;  
Let the water and the blood,  
From thy riven (wounded) side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure,  
Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r. (Save  
from wrath and make me pure.)

Not the labors of my hands can fulfill (fill all)  
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 thy 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!

remarkable in light of his having been born an albino with resulting vision difficulties. Thomas Hastings concluded his life's work at New York in May of 1872, at the age of 88.

person to have built on the art of another. The lines then written could well have lain for years in a file of unfinished poems until called for by the circumstance that led to their publication. This is all deduction, but it is a plausible merger of the two accounts of the hymn's origin.



As with other hymns so long in the public domain, some of the text has been changed over the years to suit the various hymnal editors and many variations exist. To the right, comparison of what is believed to be the original text, with modern version changes in parentheses. The original text has four verses.

It is an interesting historical note that the original last verse included the no longer used term "eye-strings" which, according to the dictionary, are "organic eye attachments formerly believed to break at death or blindness."

"Rock of Ages" is said to have been published in over 2400 hymnals. Many of the early hymnals were text only. The hymn has been set to several tunes; the one most commonly used today is known as TOPLADY and was written by Thomas Hastings about 1830. The music has the same melody and rhythm in the first and last stanzas. The first and last verses of "Rock of Ages" in 3/2 time appeared in an arrangement for women's voices in the 1948 edition of 'Hymns, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.' (LDS Hymnal) In the 1985 version of the LDS Hymnal, the first, second and fourth verses of the hymn were included in 3/4 time and in a slightly lower key, arranged for congregational singing in four parts.

It is instructive to note that the music we associate with the hymn was written more than 50 years after the hymn text was published. The text author, Augustus Toplady, died about two years after the hymn text was published and never heard the finished work that he is now most remembered for.

While I draw this fleeting breath  
 When my eye-strings break (When mine  
 eyes shall close) in death,  
 When I soar (When I rise) to worlds  
 unknown  
 See thee on thy judgment throne, (And  
 behold thee on thy throne,)  
 Rock of ages, cleft for me,  
 Let me hide myself in thee!