

Song Speak: Rock of Ages

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Rock of Ages is one of the most beloved hymns in the English language. The text of this hymn was written by Augustus Montague Toplady (what a name!). "By age 12 he was preaching sermons to whoever would listen. At 14 he began writing hymns."¹ By the time he was 22 he had become an Anglican priest and as a staunch Calvinist bitterly opposed the Arminian theology of John and Charles Wesley, who began the Methodist movement. In 1776, two years before his short life would end, he wrote an magazine article about the nature of God's forgiveness.² The purpose of the article was to oppose what he considered to be Wesley's deficient view of human depravity and divine forgiveness.

In this article, Toplady compared our sinful condition before God to the national debt of England. To help the reader see how formidable was the national debt, he began the article with a series of questions and answers- the last of which were these:

Q: 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.

Now I'm sure the debt of England at that time was a large amount, but I'm also sure Toplady's head would spin if he were to see the figures on America's national debt today- over \$12 trillion and rising quickly! (It's grown by an average of \$3.85 billion *per day* since September 28, 2007.)³ But the point he was trying to make was not an economic one. It was a spiritual one. In essence, he was saying, "You think our national debt is big? It's nothing compared to the debt we owe God!" The rest of the article unpacks our moral debt to God and the solution to our problem, still in the question and answer format:

Q: When shall we be able to pay off this immense debt?

A: Never. Eternity itself, so far from clearing us of the dreadful arrear, would only add to the score by plunging us deeper and deeper into even to infinity. Hence the damned will never be able to satisfy the justice of the Almighty Creditor.

Q: If so, are we not lost, without remedy and without end?

A: In ourselves we are. But (sing, O heavens!) God's own arm brought salvation.

Q: What return can believers render, to the glorious and gracious Trinity, for mercy and plenteous redemption like this?

A: We can only admire and bless the Father, for electing us in Christ, and for laying on him the iniquity 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.

Toplady ended the article with the text to his now famous hymn. He titled it "***A living and dying PRAYER for the HOLIEST BELIEVER in the World.***" The point of this title (and of the song) is that if we desire to

be set free from the burden of our sin and be seen as holy by God, we will not try to attain it through our own efforts. That would be futile. Rather, we simply trust in the riches of Christ. Unable to get ourselves out of the mess of our sin, we rely on Christ to do what we cannot. We look to him and him alone to be made clean, to have our debt canceled. Not only that, the work of Christ has the effect of a "double cure"- not only saving us from God's wrath, but also freeing us from sin's power. As we begin this new year, working away at our new resolutions, let our chief resolution be this: Let me hide myself in Thee!

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee;

1 *Then Sings My Soul*, Robert Morgan, p.75

2 The article, "A remarkable CALCULATION: Introduced here, for the sake of the SPIRITUAL IMPROVEMENT subjoined. QUESTIONS and ANSWERS, relative to the NATIONAL DEBT." can be found in its entirety at <http://www.toplady.org.uk/toplady%20writings/Gospel%20Magazine.htm>

3 http://www.brillig.com/debt_clock/

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

Not the labor 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.
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.

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.
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.⁴

An audio clip and lead sheet of this song may be found at: www.sbcommunity.org/songspeak/rockofages

⁴ I've added the repeated line at the end to fit my new tune. The traditional tune that many grew up singing was not written by Toplady, but by Thomas Hastings decades later.