Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood
From thy riven side which flowed
Be of sin the double cure:
Cleanse me from its guilt and pow’r.

Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfil 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!

While I draw this fleeting breath,
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!

In the year 1776, a document was published whose words—or at least some of them—are known and treasured by many, many people. Written by an Englishman, those words have been a declaration spoken in the hearts of many. They are words whose truths you and I hold to be clearly evident—then, now, and always.

But those words are not a Declaration of Independence. Rather, those words are a declaration of dependence. The Englishman who wrote those words was not Thomas Jefferson, but a pastor in England, the enjoyably-named Augustus Toplady, who wrote the hymn “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me.”

The opening imagery appears to have been taken from our Old Testament reading for this morning. Shortly beforehand God had rescued his people from Egypt after many years of slavery and begun guiding them to their homeland. Along the way, they stopped at Mount Sinai. God called Moses to the top of Mount Sinai so he could give him the law, written on stone tablets. Moses was up there for a number of days, and the Israelites grew impatient. Tired of waiting for Moses, they decided to make themselves a god.

Melting gold jewelry they had been given by the Egyptians who were eager to give the Israelites whatever was necessary in order to get them to leave their country, they made it into a statue of a calf, declared it to be a god, and “worshiped” in a most pagan manner. When Moses came down from the mountain and saw this, he called upon the Israelites to take up arms against the ringleaders—which they did. God spared the rest of the Israelites and graciously forgave them. But Moses was still concerned about leading such a rebellious people, and he asked God for reassurance. God gave Moses that assurance, saying “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest…I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.” (Exodus 33:14,17)
Moses then made a daring request: “Now show me your glory.” It was a request that was perhaps prompted by great faith and a desire to see every last bit of God’s holiness, majesty and perfection.

It was also too bold of a wish, for as God told Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” Just as the human eye isn’t able to stare directly at the sun without being blinded, sinful human beings can’t stare directly at God and survive.

Fortunately, God graciously protected Moses from himself by putting Moses into a cleft in the rock, so that he, an unworthy sinner himself, could get a glorious but survivable glimpse of God’s glory.

Of course, God isn’t only the God who protects us from our overzealousness for communion and connection with him, but he’s also the God who protects us from our enemies of sin, death, and Satan. In fact, he is the God who protects us from the storm of his very own wrath against us and our sins.

We might think that we could do that on our own by doing enough good works, but Toplady spends the middle two verses of his hymn using one biblical allusion after another to show us our need to hide in Jesus, the Rock of Ages.

He says “Not the labors of my hands can fulfill the law’s demands.” As was mentioned a number of Sundays ago in the sermon, the Pharisees had labored furiously at keeping God’s law, and yet Jesus said that it still wasn’t enough to enter Heaven. The Apostle Paul said that the labors of even your hands weren’t enough when he wrote, “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law.” (Romans 3:20)

Paul knew that from experience. In Philippians he spoke of how zealous he had been and how he had feverishly pursued “legalistic righteousness”—and then he goes on to say that none of it was worth anything when it came to salvation, and that therefore he considered it all “rubbish.” (Philippians 3:4-9)

That’s a hard thing for you and me to accept about our lives. We’d like to think that the good things we do must count for something, must merit something in God’s eyes. And if they don’t yet merit enough, we need to labor just a little bit harder. But no matter what, it never fulfills the law’s demands—and in great part that’s because so much of the labor of our hands is done to ignore the law’s demands.

So what about repentance? What about sincere sorrow over sin? This may sound like a jarring thing at first, but no, even repentance does not get the job done. That may seem unfair at first, but think about it: Going before a judge and saying you’re sorry, bawling your eyes out in front of that judge won’t change the cold hard facts of the case. If you’re guilty of some crime in the past, it does not matter how sorry you are—you’re still going to have to pay the penalty. Even sorrow over sin does not in and of itself atone for sin—not even if your tears flowed forever.

As was said before, even the Apostle Paul considered all his many good works to be worth nothing. To bring those into God's courtroom and approach the bench and hand them to him would be like a murderer approaching the judge and handing him a "Perfect Attendance--Third Quarter" certificate from 2nd grade. It’s worth nothing, and it’s even somewhat insulting to hand it to the judge as if you expect that his sense of justice can be so easily warped and so easily swayed.

I know—I love my "good works" just as much as you love yours. I want so badly to hand them to God and say to him, like someone who walks into a pawn shop with a clock that's missing its hour hand, "What'll you give me for this?" Um, I can give you nothing—because that’s what it worth!
So leave your "good works" behind!
Don't bring them when you come to God. Simply cling to the cross of Christ! If the word "cling" sounds to you like a drowning man who has only one hope, only one thing to hang onto, who isn't going to ever let it go...that's right.

Christ is indeed our only hope, our only refuge, the only rock of ages in whose cleft we can hide.

But he is a sure hope! Although we have no righteousness of our own with which to clothe ourselves, although the words Jesus spoke in Revelation to the congregation apply also to us by nature--"You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17) --we know where to go with our nakedness. Naked, we come for dress to the one who then immediately went on to promise those who believe in him "white clothes to wear" (Revelation 3:17)--clothes that we received when we were baptized, for Paul says, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:27)

Although we are entirely, utterly helpless to save ourselves, we echo Toplady's prayer and we say to Jesus that "we look to thee for grace." We pray the prayer of the tax collector--"God, have mercy on me, a sinner." (Luke 18:13) And when we look to Jesus for grace, that is exactly what we find—undeserved love that has no strings attached. In fact, that's how John describes him when he introduces Jesus to us in the first chapter of the Gospel of John—as being "full of grace."

Knowing that, we don’t view Jesus as a furnace breathing fiery judgment, but as a fountain offering cleansing from sin. So we rush to him in repentance, knowing that he is our only hope for salvation, knowing that he will surely wash us.

To review then, according to verse 3, what do we bring to God? Nothing, for we are naked, we are helpless, and we are foul. So what do we do? We cling to the cross of Jesus, we come to Jesus for dress, we look to Jesus for grace, and we fly to the fountain of Jesus’ blood, where we are washed.

Yes, our relationship to God dare not be one of independence from him, but one of utter dependence on him. But when in humility we have come to total dependence on him for dress, washing, and grace, then we can even have the confidence that Toplady expressed in the closing verse of his hymn. It is a confidence that Christ is a rock that gives us shelter in all ages—from birth all the way even to death.

That confidence was expressed by Toplady just two years after this hymn was published. At the age of 38, he contracted tuberculosis. These were reputedly the last words that he spoke: “My heart beats every day stronger and stronger for glory. Sickness is no affliction, pain no curse, death itself no disillusionment. My prayers are all converted to praise.”

That kind of confidence has been seen many times before and since. It is the confidence that Jesus (Luke 23:46) and, later, Stephen expressed in the face of death, peacefully placing their souls into God’s hands (Acts 7:59). It’s the joy that Job expressed when he talked about death as something that would not keep him from, but actually result in him seeing his Savior. (Job 19:25-27)

It is the confidence of every believer in Christ, because it is a confidence that is based in Christ. It is the confidence that was expressed in the final words of “Rock of Ages”, where Toplady wrote:

“While I draw this fleeting breath, 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!” Amen.