

Proper 18/16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)  
“How Clear Is Our Vocation, Lord” (*Lutheran Service Book*, # 853)

Carl Schalk has said that hymns must tell at least some part of the story of salvation. This stirring hymn by Fred Pratt Green tells *our* story, not of the course of human history but of the trajectory of faith. What is the Christian life? How are we to live it? What are its joys, its dangers, and how can we best position ourselves to receive God’s abundant blessings and return them in greater measure?

Supported magnificently by C. Hubert H. Parry’s soaring tune REPTON, Green’s text leads us through the four corridors of faith—affirmation, prayer, reflection and exhortation.

Stanza 1 is an affirmation of how our lives are to be oriented if and when we turn toward God and away from false idols. We love, obey and trust God above all things. We live according to God’s Word and apply ourselves daily to the study of scripture. This yields new life each day and the realization that, in placing all our hope in God, he is our rock, fortress, shield, and stronghold and “will not let us fall.”

In Stanza 2 we recognize that we live in a world in which the devil is still in control. That the “yoke” of God’s law can be “hard to bear” testifies to the battle between flesh and Spirit that Paul knew only too well (Romans 7:21, Galatians 5:17). Our cunning adversary wreaks chaos by using worldly pressures to distract and confuse the mind that seeks only to know God. So tangled do we become in our efforts to care for others that even love cannot straighten things out. Our only hope is to turn to God in fervent prayer: “Our inward life repair.”

Stanza 3 is a reflection on endurance in the face of persecution that helps us put the worldly pressures from Stanza 2 into perspective. The saints bore unimaginable hardships with joy, because this gave them the opportunity to testify (Luke 21:13) to God’s power, majesty, love, and saving grace. How small in comparison, Green suggests, are our casual testimonies of faith: “Oh, yes, of course I believe in God.” Furthermore, the terrible sin of pride that tempts us to think we are in control places a barrier between us and God, one that obscures God’s healing, life-giving power.

It is Stanza 4, however, in which we discover the true nature of the life of faith that makes possible obedience, trust, prayer and perseverance: It lies in the crucified Christ; in his vulnerability and humiliation, he who was like us in every way except without sin; and in his death and resurrection, with the latter “not the undoing of the failure of the cross” but “the unveiling of its success.”<sup>1</sup> Green concludes with an exhortation for the ages: “May we not cease to look to you / The cross you hung upon—All you endeavored done.”

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas John Hall on Martin Luther, in *The Cross in Our Context*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, 235.

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How clear is our vocation, Lord, when once we heed your call:  
to live according to your Word and daily learn, refreshed, restored,  
that you are Lord of all and will not let us fall.

But if, forgetful, we should find your yoke is hard to bear;  
if worldly pressures fray the mind, and love itself cannot unwind  
its tangled skein of care: our inward life repair.

We marvel how your saints become in hindrances more sure;  
whose joyful virtues put to shame the casual way we wear your name  
and by our faults obscure your pow'r to cleanse and cure.

In what you give us, Lord, to do, together or alone,  
in old routines or ventures new, may we not cease to look to you,  
the cross you hung upon—all you endeavored done.

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