



Texts in Context

“It shall not reach you”: Talisman or Vocation? Reading Psalm 91 in Time of War¹

FREDERICK J. GAISER

“**A** thousand may fall at your left side, ten thousand at your right, but it shall not reach you” (Ps 91:7). How shall we hear this confident declaration—as a call to trust in God’s protective care or as an invitation to trust in the power of human magic? And what is the difference?

The psalm itself poses a danger. Because its assurance of security is so comprehensive and confident, it is especially subject to the misuse that is a possibility for all religious claims, that of turning faith into superstition. In Judaism and Christianity, bits of the text have been worn in amulets that were believed to be a kind of magical protection for those who wore them.²

My own experience echoes Mays’s caution. Christians in more than one place around the world have told me of their trust in the power of these words, written on a scrap of paper and placed under their pillows or on their bedroom walls, to

¹Some of the material of this essay was presented orally at the Jewish-Christian Seminar at Luther Seminary on April 15, 2004.

²James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994) 297.

God’s protection as announced in Ps 91 might be misunderstood as a magical shield, keeping me from all harm—or it might be received as a gift that enables me to give myself in service of the neighbor.

protect them from deadly harm. More recently, my daughter has been advised that she need not worry about her husband in Iraq if only they and others regularly rehearse these words, which will surely protect *him* from danger, come what may to those around him.

We really are threatened by war and terror—the psalm’s “terror of the night” and 9/11’s terror of broad daylight; the psalm’s “arrow that flies by day” and Iraq’s deadly rockets that fly at any hour. In the face of all of this, we properly seek the help and guidance of God; in doing that, we properly pray Ps 91. But, as Christians, how do we pray Ps 91 properly?

Psalms 91 does not appear in the lectionary during this Easter season, but it surely could. Congregations over the next Sundays will sing or pray many psalms that contain similar assertions of God’s certain care. Any or all of these psalms could be and, no doubt, have been used in inappropriate ways, seeking to manipulate God into protecting me or mine at the expense of “them”—whether “they” are personal or political enemies or the powers and principalities of evil. At the same time, all of our Easter psalms can surely be prayed in the name and spirit of Christ.³ Our consideration of Ps 91 might, in fact, serve as a test case for how we read much of the Old Testament in a time of national conflict. What will it mean to hear God’s confident promises to Israel in ways that do not contribute to personal selfishness or xenophobic arrogance?

THE PROBLEM DEEPENS

One solution to this problem is simply to give up on Ps 91 and the Old Testament; to regard them, with Marcion, as witnesses to a pre-Christian or sub-Christian religion—and, indeed, a pre-Christian or sub-Christian god—now fortunately set aside in favor of the New Testament Father of Jesus. Just such a move was made by Emanuel Hirsch, a prominent Luther scholar of the last century. Hirsch reflected on Ps 91 in his little book on *The Old Testament and the Preaching of the Gospel*:

As a pastor visiting the sick, I often read from the Psalter (in the spirit of Luther’s well-known Preface to the Psalter that I had always regarded so highly). And so one day, I read Psalm 91 to a rather poor and deeply distressed village woman, a mother whose son was away at war. Seldom have I seen such deep spiritual response, such a blessed comfort sweep over a person as I did that day. When I returned a few days later, the woman was up and about, but still wanted to hear a psalm read. I began with a different psalm, but she demanded a repetition of Psalm 91. I asked her why, and the conversation produced for me the terrible discovery of the reason for her devotion and comfort. “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you”—she had taken this as a personal oracle, a promise that God would return her son to her alive. Unlike the many other women in our villages and cities who had lost or

³For a consideration of several of the Easter psalms as preaching texts, see my earlier Texts in Context article, “‘Come and See What God Has Done’: The Psalms of Easter,” *Word & World* 7/2 (1987) 207–214.

would lose their husbands and sons, she would keep hers. As tenderly as possible, I tried to help her understand that this kind of trust in God was less than Christian. She strongly rejected any such suggestion, and my pastoral connection with her was broken forever. As I walked home, heavily burdened that I had aided a person toward false belief and had been unable to correct it, the thought suddenly came to me that this woman was, in a certain sense, right: she believed in exactly the same way as the psalm that I had read to her. After that, I avoided this psalm in my Christian pastoral care and instruction. More, I became quite cautious about the use of the Old Testament Psalter at all, either at the sick bed or in instruction. Instead, I read from the New Testament and from our German evangelical psalm book, that is, the hymnal.⁴

Hirsch was right in decrying a magical use of the psalm. He was wrong, however, in assuming that this use characterized the Old Testament's own self-understanding, and even more profoundly wrong when this became for him a rejection of Judaism itself and an embrace of National Socialism.⁵

“the psalm reflects prebiblical superstition that has forever remained sub-biblical and seems to find ways to emerge in every generation, sometimes crudely, sometimes in relatively more sophisticated forms, including today’s various religion-as-self-help exercises”

The problem is that the psalm does, in fact, lend itself to such worst-case readings, and it has been used that way by both Christians and Jews. In that reading, the psalm applies to the righteous individual, who can protect herself from all harm—wrought by weather or warfare, by demons or disease, by wild animals or wicked enemies—if she will only believe properly, act properly, and pray properly. Writing in the new *Jewish Study Bible*, Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler admit the possibility that, even in its origins, the psalm may reflect “popular religion and superstition.”⁶ Many other scholars agree, and, if they are correct, the psalm reflects prebiblical superstition that has forever remained sub-biblical and seems to find ways to emerge in every generation, sometimes crudely, sometimes in relatively more sophisticated forms, including today’s various religion-as-self-help exercises. The common denominator is the notion that religion or spirituality or god or Bible is *something* that I can use for my benefit. Still, even if such understandings lie in the psalm’s background, they can hardly mark its canonical biblical use, since the Bible—in Old Testament and New—firmly rejects a superstitious

⁴Emanuel Hirsch, *Das Alte Testament und die Predigt des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1936) 6–7; my translation.

⁵See Robert D. Ericksen, “Emanuel Hirsch: Nazi Intellectual,” in *Theologians under Hitler* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 120–197.

⁶Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, “Psalms,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 1385.

use of religion.⁷ But that rejection needs to be repeated and justified in every age, for superstition in the name of religion is never far beneath the veneer of supposedly more sophisticated religious faith everywhere.

READING THE PSALM

What can protect us against a superstitious reading of the psalm? Well, reading the psalm might help! It will never be possible, of course, to prevent people (including ourselves) from using individual verses of Scripture apart from their context as nuggets of truth and sources of personal comfort—nor would we want to. Still, we need ways to prevent ourselves and others from the misuse of Scripture that brings false comfort, leading us astray and impugning the character of God—violating the First Commandment by using God’s name superstitiously and compromising our witness to the gospel.⁸ It is always appropriate to ask what a text actually says.

Literary Structure

There is more than one way to read a psalm, and I do not mean here to offer a full exegesis of this text, but literary structure brings particular insight into the meaning of Ps 91. The psalm seems to be composed of two parallel stanzas of instruction, followed by a divine response:

STANZA 1		STANZA 2
“I” speak of the Lord, the “Most High,” “my refuge” (vv. 1–2)	A	“I” speak of the Lord, the “Most High,” “my refuge” (9–10)
He will deliver you (3–4)	B	He will guard you (11–12)
You will not fear (5–8)	C	You will tread on lion and serpent (13)
RESPONSE		
I (God) will deliver, protect, answer (14–15a)	X	
I will be with him (15b)		Y
I will rescue, honor, satisfy, show (15c–16)	X’	

As the structure makes clear, the psalm begins with a twofold prophetic or priestly address to “you.” The logic is like that of Ps 46 (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”):

⁷For example: No soothsayers, no necromancers, no sorcerers, no diviners, says Deuteronomy (18:10–14); magic is incompatible with the work of the Spirit, insists Acts (8:9–24; 13:6–11; 19:18–19); signs and omens are marks of false messiahs and false prophets (Mark 13:22). Interestingly, both Deut 18:14–15 and Isa 44:25–26 directly contrast soothsayers or diviners with prophets, making clear that God’s prophetic word is not to be confused with any hint of magic (compare also Jer 23:28).

⁸Luther’s explanation of the First Commandment in the *Small Catechism* includes using God’s name to “practice magic” among the ways we take God’s name in vain.

PSALM 46

God is our refuge (הַצְּלָמָה) and strength,
 a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear...(46:1–2)

PSALM 91

You...will say to the Lord, “My refuge (הַצְּלָמָה)
 and my fortress...”
 ...You will not fear... (91:1–2, 5)

The basis for “our” confidence is not in ourselves—and surely not in our talismans—but in the promises and faithfulness of God, announced in the credal proclamation that begins the first two stanzas of Ps 91—God as our refuge and fortress.

While Ps 46 speaks of “our” refuge, Ps 91 speaks of “my” refuge. The two are properly read in conjunction with one another and are together characteristic of the language of biblical prayer. Both forms are true, and both are necessary for the biblical witness. “My” deliverance does not come apart from “our” deliverance, and “our” deliverance is not complete without “my” deliverance. God’s care for God’s people includes God’s care for me; God’s care for me is sign of God’s care for God’s people.⁹ The psalm is certainly available for the comfort of the individual, and rightly so, but never in the sense that God’s care for “me” would come at the expense of or in preference to God’s care for other faithful members of the community of believers. The promise of Ps 91 comes to one who dwells among the “wicked” (v. 8), not to one among the faithful who is preferentially rescued.

***“My’ deliverance does not come apart from ‘our’ deliverance, and
 ‘our’ deliverance is not complete without ‘my’ deliverance”***

The psalm closes with an oracle of God, confirming God’s care for the faithful Israelite “who loves me” (v. 14). Although in the Hebrew text the reference here, too, is singular, NRSV’s inclusive translation (“those who love me”) is appropriate. The psalm speaks of God’s trustworthy care for a people, for Israel, for the church, for all the saints—for each one of them, to be sure, but not for the magical protection of one among others who are not recipients of the same care. At the center of the oracle’s XYX’ structure is God’s “immanuel” promise in Y (“I will be with him”), which is the basis for the seven (!) active verbs of deliverance in X and X’ (I will deliver, protect, answer [X]; rescue, honor, satisfy, show [X’]).

Liturgical Setting

The language of the psalm, along with its careful structure, suggests a liturgical setting—hardly surprising for a text from Israel’s worship book. Most understand the “shelter of the Most High” to be the temple. The changing voices constitute a liturgical litany. The voice of God, especially in this kind of structured liturgy, comes through the voice of one commissioned to speak for God within the community’s worship. Thus, the endangered one finds haven in the community of

⁹See my “Individual and Corporate Prayer in Old Testament Perspective,” in *A Primer on Prayer*, ed. Paul R. Sponheim (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 9–22.

God's people and in the faith nurtured among them. Within the community's worship the one in distress encounters God. Here is where the psalm's promised safety is to be found. The psalm's assurance of protection from harm announces God's eschatological protection celebrated in the communal worship at Zion, where God will finally be victorious over all forces of chaos and darkness. Communal worship does not, of course, negate individual experience. Indeed, the experience of alienating distress and the personal encounter with God within that distress is a significant way in which the individual *becomes* individual—but never apart from community.¹⁰

“the psalm in its present context speaks of the protection and liberation of a captive people, not of the random protection of one”

Canonical Reading

Recent canonical readings of the psalms have recognized that their order is not merely haphazard. Indeed, “A. F. Kirkpatrick argued long ago that Psalms 90–92 belong together and that Psalm 91 responds with assurance to Israel's voice out of exile (Psalm 90).”¹¹ This connection is suggested not only by the present order, but also by verbal links between the two psalms and by the lack of a new superscript for Ps 91.¹² While the language of Ps 91 is singular and the nature of the distress not historically defined, the prayer is now drawn into Book Four of the Psalter, which assures Israel that God reigns, despite appearances to the contrary in Babylonian exile—that “even without land, Temple, and monarchy, relatedness to God is possible.”¹³ In other words, the psalm in its present context speaks of the protection and liberation of a captive people—God's work of justice, reversing the world's oppressive order—not of the random protection of one, selected capriciously from among others of like station in a similar situation.

Spiritual Reading

As with all psalms, the concrete language can be and has throughout the ages been spiritualized and reinterpreted. Thus, the “snare of the fowler” or the “terror of the night” or the thousand who fall at my side are read not literally but as any

¹⁰See my “The Emergence of the Self in the Old Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 14/1 (1992) 1–29.

¹¹J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 1047; McCann here refers to A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951) 553–554.

¹²See especially David M. Howard Jr., “A Canonical Reading of Psalms 90–94,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 108–123. Howard argues that “significant links can be seen between every consecutive psalm in Psalms 90–94” (123). “Particularly striking [in Ps 91] is the affirmation about human longevity in v. 16a (‘With long life I will satisfy him’), in light of the thoughts on the ephemerality of life that are expressed in Psalm 90 (especially vv. 4–6, 9–10)” (112).

¹³McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” 1040; see also Gerald H. Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms,” in *Shape and Shaping* (72–82).

number of possible moments of terror and distress in which I can avail myself of the spiritual comfort of this psalm. Indeed, most believe that has already happened in the canonical psalm itself, where the “terror,” “arrow,” “pestilence,” and “destruction” of verses 5 and 6—which may well once have been understood as demonic forces—have now been demythologized into the various pains and terrors of this world, including the political oppression of the exile.

Spiritual readings open the psalms to varied use, but they might also relegate God’s protection to a spiritual world quite apart from this one, where, to be sure, nothing can touch me, but only because I live in an unreal and ethereal state of denial. This is not the world of the psalms. With the psalmist I pray here for protection not beyond this world but in a world that touches and intersects this one, God’s own kingdom, marked with the full content of biblical faith. This is what the great Lutheran hymn writer Paul Gerhardt suggested in his 1653 hymnic paraphrase of Ps 91—a simple poetic retelling of the psalm that makes no specific Christian reference other than perhaps its identification of God’s protecting shield as “the true word of God.”¹⁴ If God’s word, in all its fulness, is my protection, then my protection is sure, but nothing is simple and there will be no place for magic. Indeed, for Gerhardt, God does not promise avoidance of peril, but, after the present experience of very real suffering, to bring the pray-er to “eternal salvation” (“Ins Ewge Heyl versetzen”).

Reading in Christ

For Christians, understanding God’s word as my protector will move to a reading of the psalm in the light of Christ, the word of God incarnate. The New Testament is perhaps never so insightful as when it puts the temptation to read the psalm as superstitious or magical protection in the mouth of Satan:

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Luke 4:9–12)

Just as Jesus refused to employ this promise as talisman, so, I think, must Jesus’ followers. Further, Christians will recognize that, since Jesus came not to be served but to serve, so, too, they will be called to give themselves in the service of others rather than to seek protection at the expense of others. And, interestingly, this is not a reading alien to Jewish interpreters. It is enlightening to contrast the anti-Old Testament, anti-Jewish reading of Emanuel Hirsch with the reading of the Jewish commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. The psalm closes with this divine promise (in Hirsch’s translation of vv. 14–16):

¹⁴“Der Schild ist Gottes wahres Wort”: Paul Gerhardt, “Wer unterm Schirm des Höchsten sitzt,” in *Leben und Lieder von Paulus Gerhardt*, ed. E. C. G. Langbecker (Berlin: Verlag der Sand’schen Buchhandlung, 1841) 746–748. See the full German text of the hymn along with my translation in the addendum to this article.

For it [Israel] clings to Me with yearning; therefore I shall deliver it. I will set it on high, because it knows My Name. When it calls upon Me, that I shall answer it, I will be with it in distress, I will free it and I shall bring it to honor, I will satisfy it with length of days and let it behold My salvation.

Rabbi Hirsch understands God to be speaking of Israel and states that “Israel understands and evaluates its own life and the world about it in terms of the truth revealed to it by My Name concerning My wishes and My sovereignty”—that is, not at all unlike Paul Gerhardt’s understanding of God’s word as God’s true protective agent. And what does that word teach? God’s promise, in Rabbi Hirsch’s paraphrase, is this:

When Israel calls upon Me, then I shall answer it; I shall be with it and near it in times of distress. I shall relieve it even more from earthly shackles, and make it ever better prepared to fulfill its task....I shall give My people some insight into the course of My Providence with which I shall bring about my plan in the midst of mankind for human salvation.¹⁵

With Gen 12, Rabbi Hirsch understands that Israel’s “task” is to be a blessing to all humankind and that it is for this purpose that God shelters Israel. Christians, similarly, understand themselves to be protected and liberated by God in Christ in order that, with Christ, they may give themselves in service of the neighbor. Consider Jesus’ second use of this text: although he rejected it for himself when tempted by Satan, he promised it to his disciples when he sent them into the villages: “See, I have

“Christians understand themselves to be protected and liberated by God in Christ in order that, with Christ, they may give themselves in service of the neighbor”

given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:19–20). Here, the psalm is turned around, away from individualized magic for my sake and toward the protection offered by God as God’s people give themselves in mission and communal service of the other. It is now no longer talisman, but vocation. That is, God’s protective care is not “mine” (just as the gospel is never mine); it comes always as gift, assuring me that God provides all I need precisely so I may take no thought for the morrow and give myself to the neighbor. The shelter that Jesus promises here is not so much immediate physical protection (indeed, God’s mission might jeopardize my physical survival) as eternal solace in God’s divine embrace—though, to be sure, an “eternal solace” with profound present effect.

Can we hear that message addressed to us? This psalm surely does mean to

¹⁵Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Psalms*, vol. 2 (New York: Philipp Feldheim, 1966)151–152.

protect the righteous in this world, to lift up the oppressed, to deliver the captives, to calm the terrified, to comfort the believer—it means that for us and it means to do it for others through us. As Christ is our brother and protector, we are assured of God’s good will for us, and as we are in Christ, we are brother to the world, sister to the neighbor.

How can we pull that off? Precisely by the logic (or theo-logic) of this psalm. It is paralleled not only by Ps 46 (as we have seen) but also by Rom 8:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35, 37–39)

Protection, yes, but hardly the magic that will keep any of us from all harm—more like the “deep magic” of Narnia that required Aslan’s death for the sake of that world.¹⁶ Vocation, not talisman.

In moments of danger, individual combat soldiers and their families might well prefer talisman to vocation—immediate protection for “me,” quite apart from any broader perspective. Magic would be okay, perhaps, if we could pull it off. Trouble is, of course, we cannot, so it is a vain hope. Worse, it diminishes the true hope, proclaimed by this psalm and the full biblical witness, that God is concerned enough about “me” to bring me into God’s ongoing venture of drawing all people unto himself and, thus, finally and forever ushering in the time when swords will be beaten into plowshares and nations shall not learn war anymore (Isa 2:1–4). There is great confidence in this vision but, alas, no magic, and no immediate indemnity from the terrible realities of mortality and human strife; but this is only because God chooses to be with us in the world that is rather than to promise a world of make-believe that is not. ⊕

FREDERICK J. GAISER is professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, and editor of Word & World.

¹⁶See especially chapters 13 and 15 of C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (original copyright 1950; now available, e.g., in *The Complete Chronicles of Narnia* [New York: HarperCollins, 2000]).

PAUL GERHARDT, "WER UNTERM SCHIRM DES HÖCHSTEN SITZT" (PSALM 91)

Tune: Am Wasserflüssen Babylon (*Lutheran Book of Worship* 105)

1
When sheltered by our God Most High,
We dwell in surest cover;
When lightning splits the stormy sky,
We hide in God, no other.
We cry in hope, "You are my light,
My sure defense, my heart's delight,
My refuge, shield, and safety.
You save me from the fowler's snare;
Lord, you alone give certain care
When deathly dangers plague me."

2
Awake, my heart! Trust in your Lord
To guard you late and early.
God's wings spread wide and shade afford
Where life is lived securely.
God's shield supplies protection sure
Against each arrow, bane, and lure
That flies or wastes or beckons.
That shield is God's own faithful word,
Which frees me now to face assured
All fears with which earth reckons.

3
When darkest night falls like a net,
You rest, still unencumbered,
At peace, though all the day beset
By enemies unnumbered.
The pestilence that stalks by night
And reappears at noonday bright
Will ever be turned from you.
And though a thousand fall beside,
Ten thousand find no place to hide,
It will not come upon you.

4
With confidence your eyes will see
The downfall of the wicked;
The consequence they cannot flee
Of evil deeds committed.
Those who forsake God and God's ways
Will be forsaken all their days,
Denying, find denial.
But those who hold fast to the Lord

200

1
Wer unterm Schirm des Höchsten sitzt
Der ist sehr wohl bedeckt:
Wenn alles donnert, kracht und blitzt
Bleibt sein Hertz ungeschreckt:
Er spricht zum Herrn: du bist mein Licht
Mein Hoffnung, meine Zuversicht
Mein Thurn und starke Feste.
Du rettetest mich vons Jägers strick
Und treibst des Todes Netz zurück
Und schüttest mich aufs beste.

2
Frisch auf mein Hertz! Gott stärcket dich
Mit Krafft auf allen Seiten:
Schau her, wie seine Flügel sich
Gantz über dich ausbreiten:
Sein Schirm umfängt und deckt dich gar
Sein Schild fängt auf, was hier und dar
Von Pfeilen fleugt und tobet:
Der Schild ist Gottes wahres Wort:
Der Schirm ist was der starcke Hort
Versprochen und gelobet.

3
Wenn dich die schwartze Nacht umgiebt,
Kanst du fein sicher schlaffen:
Des Tages bleibst du unbetrübt
Von deines Feindes Waffen:
Die Peste, die im Finstern schleucht,
Und des Mittages umbherkreucht,
Wird von dir abgeführt:
Und wenn gleich tausend fallen hier
Und zehen tausend hart bey dir,
Bleibst du doch unberühret.

4
Hingegen wirst du Lust und Freud
An deinen Feinden sehen,
Wenn ihnen alles Hertzeleyd
Vom Höchsten wird geschehen:
Wer Gott verläst, wird wiederumb
Verlassen, und mit grossem Grimm
Zu seiner Zeit geschlagen:
Du aber, der du bleibst bey Gott

Find grace as their unearned reward
And help in every trial.

5

No scourge shall come into your tent;
No evil shall befall you.
You will along your way be sent
With blessing poured upon you.
God's angels follow his command
To take you firmly by the hand
O'er paths that err and crumble,
To guide your feet on ways unknown,
Alert to every waiting stone
That might cause you to stumble.

6

No roaring lion shall come near;
You'll tread on snake and serpent.
No fang or poison need you fear,
But sing with praises fervent
That God stands ever at your side:
"My servant, I'll with you abide,
Come swiftly when you call me.
I know your name, and you know mine;
In trouble you'll find help divine.
I'll come and rescue gladly."

7

"You turn to me and I will hear,
Grace flowing like a river.
Whenever enemies appear,
I promise to deliver.
I'll snatch you out of death's embrace;
Wipe signs of suffering from your face,
Give honor, exaltation.
With long life I will satisfy,
And when at last you come to die,
I'll show you my salvation."

Translation copyright © 2005, Frederick J. Gaiser

Findst Gnad und darfst in keiner Noth
Ohn Hülff und Trost verzagen.

5

Kein übels wird zu deiner Hütt
Eingehen, und dir begegnen:
Gott wird all' deine Tritt und Schritt
Auf deine Wegen segnen:
Denn er hat seiner Engelschaar
Befohlen, daß sie vor Gefahr
Dich gar genau bewahren,
Daß dein Fuß möge sicher seyn
Und nicht vielleicht an einen Stein
Zu deinen Schaden fahren.

6

Du wirst auff wilden Leuen stehn
Und treten auf die Drachen
Du wirst ihr Gifft und scharffe Zähn
In deinen Sinn verlachen:
Das machts das Gott wil bey dir seyn
Der spricht: Mein Knecht begehret mein
So wil ich ihn beyspringen.
Er kennet meines Namens Zier
Drumb wil ich ihn auch nach Begier
Mein Hülff' und Rettung bringen.

7

Er rufft mich an, so wil ich ihn
Gantz gnädiglich erhören
Wenn sein Feind auff ihn auß wil ziehn
So wil ich stehn, und wehren:
Ich wil ihn reissen aus dem Tod:
Ich wil ihn nach erlidtner Noth
Mit grosser Ehr' ergötzen:
Ich wil ihn machen Lebensatt,
Und wenn er gnug gelebet hat
Ins Ewge Heyl versetzen.

Text from E. C. G. Langbecker, ed., *Leben und Lieder von Paulus Gerhardt* (Berlin: Verlag der Sander'schen Buchhandlung, 1841) 746–748.

Emanuel Christian Gottlob Langbecker refers to a comment regarding Gerhardt's hymn made by Christian Gottfried Preuss:

Here, Christian friend, you have a splendid hymn on Psalm 91, which can provide comfort in all sorts of unpleasant circumstances, but especially when you

must lament because a large group of people attack you unjustly. Paul Gerhardt has prepared this hymn for you, yes, just for your benefit.¹⁷

The psalm, like the hymn, surely does intend comfort for the people of God. Since I have found no other English translation of the hymn, I offer one here for the benefit of present Christian readers and singers. Permission is hereby given by the translator and by *Word & World* for any who might choose to make use of it (despite the somewhat challenging tune), so long as the copyright notice is maintained.

F.J.G.

¹⁷Langbecker, *Leben und Lieder*, 748 (my translation).