

Pope Benedict XVI used his Oct. 5 audience to revisit the theme of trusting in God during times of adversity found in Psalm 23—a message that he delivered twice at the beginning of September.

“With its exquisite pastoral imagery this much-beloved Psalm speaks of the radical trust in God’s loving care which is an essential aspect of prayer,” the Pope said to pilgrims in St. Peter’s Square.

“The Psalmist expresses his tranquil certainty that he will be guided and protected, sheltered from all danger because the Lord is his shepherd,” he said.

Psalm 23 is one of the best known passages in the Bible and is commonly used in religious services by Jews, Catholics and Protestants alike. In many Christian denominations it has become a staple for any funeral liturgy. It has also been set to music by composers such as J.S. Bach, Anton Bruckner, Leonard Bernstein and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

The Pope described the psalm as a beautiful analogy of God’s love and protection for every human soul and for all humanity.

“The image evokes an atmosphere of trust, intimacy, tenderness. The shepherd knows his sheep individually, he calls them by name and they follow him because they recognize and trust him,” he said.

“He takes care of them, protects them like a treasure, and is ready to defend them in order to guarantee their well-being, to ensure they live in peace. They shall want nothing if the shepherd is with them.”

Pope Benedict charted three developments in the narrative of the psalm as it progresses. First, he said, “the Psalmist begins by presenting God as a good shepherd who guides him to green pastures, standing at his side and protecting him from every danger.”

Such “green pastures” may seem distant to those who feel stranded in a spiritual desert, the Pope observed, but “if the Lord is the shepherd, even in the desert, a place of scarcity and death, we do not lose our certainty in the radical presence of life.”

Second, he said, we move to the shepherd’s tent “where the Lord welcomes him as a guest, gracing him with the gifts of food, oil and wine.”

The Pope noted that such a showering of gifts are “an expression of the gratitude and abundance of love,” given by a God who also protects us. Thus “enemies look on powerlessly because,” said the Pope, for “when God opens His tent to welcome us, nothing can harm us.”

Finally, even after departing the Lord’s tent, the protection of God “continues to accompany the psalmist with goodness and mercy along his way, a way which leads to length of days in the Lord’s Temple,” Pope Benedict said.

This image was very significant for the Jewish people, he explained, as “the powerful image of God as the Shepherd of Israel accompanied the whole religious history of the Chosen People, from the Exodus to the return to the Promised Land.”

The Pope taught that this promise finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ “the Good Shepherd, who gave his life for his sheep, preparing for us the table of his Body and Blood as a foretaste of the definitive messianic banquet which awaits us in heaven.”

Pope Benedict concluded by urging all those present to reflect upon Psalm 23 and renew their trust in God.