

Pope Benedict XVI told pilgrims at this week's general audience that Psalm 136 summarizes the loving plan of God manifested throughout history.

"This is a great hymn of praise to celebrate the Lord in the multiple repeated manifestations of his goodness throughout the history of man," the Pope said to over 30,000 pilgrims gathered Oct. 19 in St. Peter's Square.

He explained how the psalm is known as the "Great Hallel" and is traditionally sung at the conclusion of the Passover meal because it retells the story of God's creation, the Jewish people's liberation from slavery in Egypt, 40 years of exile in the desert and subsequent entry into the Promised Land.

"As such, it was probably sung by Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper," the Pope said, pointing towards the passage in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew that says, "after they had sung a hymn, they went to the Mount of Olives." It is therefore a "horizon of praise" that "illuminates the difficult road to Golgotha."

The psalm is composed as a litany with each historical event of God saving his people being met by the repeated refrain, "for his steadfast love endures forever."

Linguistically, the Pope pointed out that the Hebrew word used for "love" in this refrain "implies faithfulness, mercy, goodness, grace, tenderness."

This constant love of God is initially recalled in the psalm in his creation of the heavens, the earth, the stars and day and night. These "great wonders," said the Pope, remind us that "it is God's faithful love, in fact, which is revealed in the ordered beauty of the universe."

That same divine love also led the Jewish people safely out of bondage in Egypt under God's "mighty hand and outstretched arm," even through the dangerous waters of the Red Sea.

"The image of the Red Sea 'split' into two," said the Pope, "seems to depict the sea like a huge monster that is cut into two pieces, and so rendered harmless."

Even during the following 40 years spent in desert wilderness, Psalm 136 still finds the love of God at work. They were four decades, the Pope explained, in which the Jewish people "guided by the Lord," learned "to live by faith, obedience and docility to God's law." And even though they were "difficult years, marked by the harshness of life" they were also "happy years, of confidence in the Lord, of filial trust," he said.

Those years were also ones in which the Lord "led his people, educated and loved them," and ultimately led them to the Promised Land.

This was the beginning of a "happy time of stability" with the "joy of building houses, planting vines, living in security and peace," explained the Pope. It was also, however, a "time of temptation to idolatry," and of "contamination with the Gentiles."

And yet, reflected the Pope, the constant love of the Lord stays with his chosen people despite their failings. This is so much the case that "in the fullness of time, the Son of God became man to give his life for the salvation of every one of us," and gave "himself as the bread in the Eucharistic mystery," so that all humanity can enter into his covenant as his adopted children.

"As we sing this great litany of God's mighty works, we give thanks that the depth of his steadfast and merciful love was fully revealed in the coming of his only-begotten Son," Pope Benedict said