

February 10

Lesson 11 (NIV)

OUR LOVING GOD

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 93

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Psalm 48:1–
3, 9–14

PSALM 48:1–3, 9–14

¹ Great is the LORD, and most worthy
of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy
mountain.

² Beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon is Mount
Zion,
the city of the Great King.

³ God is in her citadels;
he has shown himself to be her
fortress.

⁹ Within your temple, O God,
we meditate on your unfailing
love.

¹⁰ Like your name, O God,
your praise reaches to the ends
of the earth;
your right hand is filled with
righteousness.

¹¹ Mount Zion rejoices,
the villages of Judah are glad

because of your judgments.

¹² Walk about Zion, go around her,
count her towers,

¹³ consider well her ramparts,
view her citadels,

that you may tell of them
to the next generation.

¹⁴ For this God is our God for ever and
ever;

he will be our guide even to the
end.



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KEY VERSE

*This God is our God for ever and
ever.—Psalm 48:14*

OUR LOVE FOR GOD

Unit 3: Songs That Glorify the God
of Love

LESSONS 11–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the concept of God's covenantal love.
2. Explain the dangers of putting confidence in the methods God uses to protect us instead of trusting directly in him.
3. Write a prayer thanking God for his love and protection.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. "Do You Love Me?"
- B. Lesson Context
 - I. God Glorifies Zion (PSALM 48:1-3)
 - A. With His Greatness (v. 1)
 - B. With His Presence (v. 2)
 - C. With His Protection (v. 3)
 - II. Celebrate God's Leadership (PSALM 48:9-11)
 - A. Because of His Loyalty (v. 9)
Love Letters
 - B. Because of His Righteousness (v. 10)
 - C. Because of His Judgments (v. 11)
 - III. Teach Future Generations (PSALM 48:12-14)
 - A. Based on God's Protection (vv. 12, 13)
Home Church Memories
 - B. Based on God's Presence (v. 14)

Conclusion

- A. Our Loving God Leads and

Protects Us

- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Babylonian	Bab-ih-low-nee-un.
Jebusite	Jeb-yuh-site.
Nebuchadnezzar	Neb-yuh-kud- nez -er.
patriarch	pay-tree-ark.
Sinai	Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.
Tevye	Tev-yuh.
Yahweh	(Hebrew) Yah-weh.
Zaphon	Za-fon.
Zion	Zi-un.

Introduction

A. "Do You Love Me?"

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, we encounter a poor dairy farmer, Tevye, who values highly the traditions of his people. But the rapidly changing times in which he lives finds him stretched when each of his three daughters defies tradition. Tevye's role as family patriarch is to find a suitable match for each daughter. His tradition values finding a financially stable partner from within the ancient faith.

A hired matchmaker arranges for the oldest daughter to be wed to an elderly,

widowed butcher. But she is secretly in love with a poor tailor. Those two beg Tevye to call off the arranged marriage so they can marry. Tevye is conflicted, but he sees how deeply his daughter cares for the tailor, so he relents out of love for her.

Tevye's middle daughter reveals disregard for tradition by marrying a university student with a head full of revolutionary ideas. Tevye feels he has no choice but to accept the marriage. Then his third daughter does the unthinkable by marrying a Christian. Tevye reaches his breaking point and disowns her. No more!

In the middle of his turmoil, he finds himself insecure. Each of his daughters married for love, a choice not afforded Tevye and his wife when their marriage was arranged 25 years earlier. So Tevye turns to his wife and asks her if she loves him. They have never spoken of their feelings for each other, so she gives an indirect answer by offering evidence of her love: she has washed his clothes, cooked meals, cleaned house, and starved with him. Her loyalty is all the proof needed of her love for him.

Does God love us? The author of today's psalm would reply, "Just look at the evidence!"

B. Lesson Context

[Psalm 48](#) is often categorized as one of

the Zion Songs. This category also includes [Psalms 46; 76; 84; 87](#), and [122](#) (some students also include [126; 129](#), and [137](#)). These celebrate the glory of Mount Zion, the hill on which the temple in Jerusalem stood. They are concerned with the theme of God's kingship, having been written against a backdrop of competing gods and warring nations. Nationalism and religion were inseparable in biblical times, and each nation was thought to have a dominant deity who was responsible for the protection of its people. When nations warred, their gods warred as well. We see this in [Exodus 12:12](#), where God, preparing Israel for the tenth and most devastating plague, says,

On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD.

Thematically, these songs celebrate God as Israel's king, who chose to rest his presence in Jerusalem and, in it, the temple ([Psalm 46:5; 76:2; 84:1; 87:1-3; 122:1-3](#); plus today's text). From a perspective of comparative religion, a deity choosing to rest his presence on a strong mountain was not unique. For example, the pagan deity El was said to reside on Mount Zaphon (see more on [Psalm 48:2](#), below). What is exceptional is the theme that God's reign doesn't stop at Israel's bor-

ders. He is “the great King over all the earth” (Psalm 47:2, plus today’s text; compare 1 Kings 20:23, 28).

I. God Glorifies Zion

(PSALM 48:1-3)

A. With His Greatness (v. 1)

1. Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain.

When King David set out to unify the tribes of Israel, he strategically chose Jerusalem to be his capital. Jerusalem was centrally located between the upper and lower tribes; and as a Jebusite stronghold, it wasn’t associated with either region. A walled city set on a *mountain* or hill was the perfect spot from which to reign.

However, the song doesn’t open with a description of the height of the walls or the strength and numbers of the army stationed inside. Instead, attention is given to God’s greatness and his being *worthy of praise*.

Interestingly, Jerusalem is referred to as “the city of David” more than three dozen times in the Old Testament, but never that way in any psalm. Instead, the Psalms refer to Jerusalem (or Zion; see 1 Kings 8:1) as, among other designations, “city of God” or “city of our God” four times. All Old Testament instances of those are in the Zion Songs (here and in

Psalms 46:4; 48:8; and 87:3).

God’s *holy mountain* is Mount Zion (Psalm 48:2, next). This is not the first time that God is associated with a mountain in his developing relationship with his people. Moses had stated that God would bring his people to live on “the mountain of your inheritance” (Exodus 15:17). Chapters later, God has the nation camp at the base of Mount Sinai, where he revealed his power and gave the Ten Commandments (20:1-17).

Now, here on Mount Zion, the people are reminded of the greatness of Yahweh (God’s name in Hebrew, rendered *LORD* in translation). This greatness must result in praise.

B. With His Presence (v. 2)

2. Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth, like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King.

Having established the emphasis on Yahweh, the psalmist briefly diverts his attention to the renown and setting of *Mount Zion*. With the designation *like the heights of Zaphon*, the translators have made a difficult choice. The word *Zaphon* also means “north” in the Hebrew language, and that is how it is translated in Psalm 89:12 and 107:3, context requiring it.

Regarding the verse at hand, the

major Bible translations NET and CSB join NIV in rendering “Zaphon,” while KJV, NKJV, NASB, NRSV, and ESV opt for “north.” If a specific place is intended, then the psalmist is making a reference to a location where a pagan deity is imagined to dwell (see the [Lesson Context](#)). In that case, the psalmist leaves no doubt that the God of Mount Zion is superior. On the other hand, if the psalmist intends a geographical direction, then this is further commentary on Jerusalem’s geography (compare the text of and footnote to [Isaiah 14:13](#) in the NIV).

Either way, the exuberant conviction of the psalmist is obvious: Mount Zion, *the city of the Great King*—designated this way only here and in [Matthew 5:35](#)—is (or should be) *the joy of the whole earth* and not of Israel alone. The close connection between God and Mount Zion is further seen in the Zion Songs at [Psalms 76:2; 84:7; 87:2, 5](#).

What Do You Think?

How can we recast God as the joy of the whole earth when religion is viewed as a source of conflict and intolerance in many areas?

Digging Deeper

How does your evaluation of that obstacle in your locality influence how you will proclaim God as the joy of the whole world there?

C. With His Protection (v. 3)

3. God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress.

The psalmist turns his attention from Mount Zion back to *God*. The designation of God as Israel’s *fortress* continues a similar thought from an earlier Zion Song ([Psalm 46:11](#)). By calling God their fortress, the psalmist reminds the people that God is their ultimate source of protection. The word translated *citadels* is rendered “fortresses” in other passages (example: [Isaiah 23:13](#)), thus establishing parallel thoughts here.

Strong walls are important for cities (see [Nehemiah 1:1–6:15](#)). Government, religion, and life itself are protected by such stone and mortar barriers. But the God who brought down the walls of Jericho ([Joshua 6](#)) can also bring down the walls of Jerusalem. The people must never lose sight of the fact that God, not walls of stone, is their ultimate protection. He will be their fortress as long as they do not forget him (compare [Psalm 94:22](#)).

In [Psalm 48:4–8](#), not in today’s text, we see the consequences for those who dare threaten Zion’s security: God rightfully receives credit for destroying the enemy’s military strength.

What Do You Think?

What will you do the next time you

find yourself putting your trust in resources you can see to the exclusion of trusting in the unseen God?

Digging Deeper

How do 2 Kings 6:15-17; 2 Corinthians 4:18; 5:7; Romans 8:24; and/or Hebrews 11:1 inform your answer?

II. Celebrate God's Leadership (PSALM 48:9-11)

A. Because of His Loyalty (v. 9)

9. Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love.

This is the only occurrence of the word *temple* in the Zion Songs (see the [Lesson Context](#)), although the alternative designation "house" occurs several times ([Psalm 84:4, 10; 122:1, 9](#)). Up until now, the reader's imagination has been directed to the geography and defenses of Jerusalem. As the psalmist shifts attention to the temple, he again reminds the people that the true strength of Israel is to be found in God's presence among them.

When King Solomon prayed his prayer of dedication for the newly built temple, he was aware that even though God chose to make the temple his meeting place with Israel, God was in no way constrained by the structure. Solomon marveled at the fact that the vast heavens

couldn't contain God, let alone the temple ([2 Chronicles 6:18](#)). Even so, God revealed that he had chosen the temple as his dwelling place as he sent his glory to fill it ([7:1-3](#)) and communicated to Solomon at night ([7:12-22](#)).

The temple is the ideal place to contemplate God's *unfailing love*. The Hebrew behind the translation *love* is very common in the Old Testament, occurring over 130 times, but in the Zion Songs it occurs only here. Elsewhere it is translated "kindness" (examples: [Psalm 109:12, 16; Isaiah 54:8](#)).

The disposition of unfailing love assumes a hierarchy in which one in a higher position is merciful to one in a lower. In biblical times, kings would enter into treaties with their subjects. These treaties outline the relationship between the two parties. The loyalty that is expected between the two parties may be expressed in terms of love. The king would love his people by protecting them and by ruling them with just laws. The people, in turn, would express their love for the king through their loyal obedience.

So *unfailing love* in this context refers primarily to King Yahweh's fierce and unwavering loyalty to his people. As the people meditate on God's track record as their king, they will find him to be nothing less than a perfect ruler. He has never

failed them. He has provided for the Israelites throughout their history.

LOVE LETTERS

Valentine's Day is nearly here. It is love-letter time.

How long has it been since you received a love letter or sent one? I have an old Whitman's chocolates box that my father gave to my mother in the late 1940s. Though the chocolates are long gone, the box is full of memories of their love. It contains 30 letters my dad sent to my mom while he was stationed away in the Army. They were newlyweds at the time.

Even though those letters have been in my possession for more than 25 years, I haven't read any of them. Why? I am fearful of invading my mother's privacy. I realize that there might be something intimate in those letters. My homesick father could have written something meant for my mother's eyes only. I don't want to intrude on that, so those letters will never be read by me.

I have no hesitation when it comes to reading the love letters of my heavenly Father, though. He wrote those letters specifically for me. He wants to maintain a deep relationship with me. He loves me and doesn't care who knows it.

Our heavenly Father knows we need to hear from him. His love compelled him

to send us valuable letters. Are you meditating as deeply on the Psalms as you should?

—C. T.

B. Because of His Righteousness (v. 10)

10a. Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth;

The psalmist returns to a predominant theme of the Zion Songs. Yahweh's rule knows no limits. God's praises don't end at Israel's borders. When his people consider his faithfulness to them, their worshipful response should be so great that it extends to *the ends of the earth*. (In other Zion Songs, compare "to the ends of the earth" in [Psalm 46:9](#); plus "praise" and "praising" in [Psalms 76:10](#); [84:4](#), respectively.) The half-verse before us therefore scoffs at the notion that any of the countless deities of the ancient Near East can challenge God's reign.

10b. your right hand is filled with righteousness.

Interestingly, God's might is not mentioned as proof of his singular existence. Instead, the proof of his superiority over any so-called gods is depicted here in terms of his *righteousness*. This is a straightforward concept: it means that God always does the right thing.

This is the only place in the psalms known as Zion Songs where this word occurs (see the [Lesson Context](#)). But other

psalms speak to God's righteousness, with contexts often pointing to God's righteous acts rather than only to God's righteous nature per se (compare [Psalm 5:8](#); [9:8](#); [65:5](#); [103:6](#)). So important is the concept of righteousness that in [Psalm 89:14](#) it is paired with "justice" as "the foundation" of God's throne.

What Do You Think?

How will you answer someone who asks, "If God is righteous, then why is there so much injustice in the world?"

Digging Deeper

Consider how Paul interacted with audiences that accepted the authority of Scripture (example: [Acts 13:13–43](#)) and those that did not (examples: [Acts 17:16–34](#); [24:24, 25](#)).

C. Because of His Judgments (v. 11)

11. Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments.

Here we have another rarity: as "righteousness" in [Psalm 48:10](#), above, occurs only there in the Zion Songs, the paired concepts of *rejoices* and *are glad* also occur only this one time in these psalms, although found frequently elsewhere (examples: [Psalms 31:7](#); [32:11](#); [40:16](#)). Indeed, the two concepts are found to be

interchangeable as an author uses the typical Hebrew style of parallelism in poetic writing. Parallelism is where one line of text says virtually the same thing as the line that follows by use of synonyms or near synonyms.

An example of such parallelism involving joy and gladness is [Psalm 53:6](#): "Let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!" Jacob was the name of the patriarch who had his name changed to Israel ([Genesis 32:28](#)), thus the two terms describe the same people group that are named after that man. The parallelism extends to what this people group is predicted to do: rejoice/be glad. Although not precise synonyms, they are very close in meaning.

And so it is in the verse at hand. *Mount Zion* refers to the city of Jerusalem and *the villages of Judah* are the rural hamlets nearby. Thus they both describe locations of people. God's protective *judgments* cover both (compare [Psalm 97:8](#)).

III. Teach Future Generations (PSALM 48:12–14)

A. Based on God's Protection (vv. 12, 13)

12. Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers,

After being explicit that the source of Jerusalem's security doesn't lie in her

defense systems, the psalmist startles us with his encouragement that the people take stock in their man-made towers! The fall of Jericho affirmed that God's power is greater than brick and mortar protection ([Joshua 6:1-25](#)). That said, the psalmist seems to acknowledge that God uses walls (and armies) as methods of fulfilling his covenant loyalty toward his people. ([Deuteronomy 28:52](#) indicates the exact opposite should the people fail to honor their part of the covenant.)

13. consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation.

The inspection of structures continues, with a purpose now revealed: to *tell of them to the next generation* (compare [Psalms 34:11; 78:4-6](#)). The worshippers are to become so familiar with the defenses of Jerusalem that they will be able to tell their children about the city's might. At first blush that may seem like an exercise in putting stock in human strength. But in this case, Jerusalem's strength is a figurative representation of God's protection and care.

What Do You Think?

How can we ensure that our support for, say, an antimissile defense system is not a failure to trust God for protection? What, if anything, does [Deuteronomy 28:15, 52](#) add to the discussion?

Digging Deeper

Conversely, how can we ensure that our opposition to that same system is not out of line with the attitude expressed in [Psalm 48:12, 13](#)?

Ultimately, Israel fails to communicate to the next generation the importance of keeping its side of the covenant. Kings lead the people into idolatry, with injustice marring the nation. This results in a period of captivity, when God allowed foreign armies to conquer the land of the 12 tribes. The army of King Nebuchadnezzar will besiege Jerusalem, destroy its walls, and carry its people into exile ([2 Chronicles 36:15-20](#)).

What Do You Think?

What creative ways can you imagine for telling the generation that follows yours about how God has provided for and sustained you?

Digging Deeper

Consider the relative values of direct, personal testimony and indirect (social media, etc.) testimony.

HOME CHURCH MEMORIES

I get a little misty-eyed when I walk through the door of my boyhood church. Going home causes you to remember. I think back to my Sunday school classroom—filled with active, inquisitive chil-

room—filled with active, inquisitive children. Oh, how our hearts thrilled at the character-building stories of the Bible! We memorized our Bible verses, and we still can quote them after these many years. We made craft projects that brightened the day of a parent or grandparent.

Small things? Mere entertainment? Not on your life! Through such methods we were taught God's Word. I can still see the faces of those who came up out of the water, grinning from ear to ear, after being baptized into Christ. God showed himself to us, alive and active, in every gathering. He still does today, and he tends to do so through human vessels. What should be your role in this?

—C. T.

B. Based on God's Presence (v. 14)

14. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.

The psalm resolves on a final note of confidence regarding *our God* (compare [Psalms 48:1, 8](#); and [122:9](#)). In verse [13](#), the readers are instructed to pass their knowledge of God and his ways to their offspring. But the knowledge of God is not the only thing moving in the future. God, himself, goes with his people. The one who *will be our guide* is the one who leads or brings (same Hebrew word in [Psalms 78:26, 52](#); [80:1](#)). Our source of pro-

tection and safety will lead us throughout our entire lives, if we let him. We have the assurance that when we reach the end of our days (*to the end*), God will be right there.

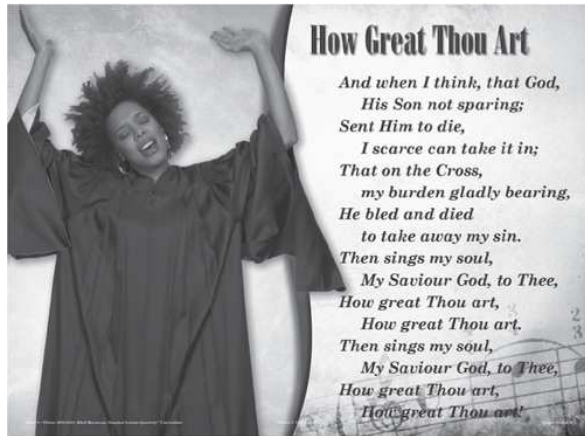
Conclusion

A. Our Loving God Leads and Protects Us

A song celebrating the city walls might seem out of place to the modern reader. For the Israelites, however, the structure was a tangible indication of God's rule and presence. He was their king, the one who promised to lead and protect them. This psalm would have presented a challenge to the worshipper during the time of the Babylonian exile. The reality of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 BC starkly contrasted with the message of [Psalm 48](#).

The tension is relieved as we consider again King Solomon's prayer of dedication of the newly built temple. He anticipated the possibility that Israel would rebel against God and be cast into exile as a result. Solomon implored God that if his people would deeply repent of their sins and turn their hearts back to him, then he would hear them, forgive them, and restore them ([2 Chronicles 6:36-39](#)). The irony is palpable, since wise Solomon himself ended up much less than wise as

he allowed foreign wives to lead him into idolatry within Jerusalem's walls (see [1 Kings 11:7-10](#)).



Visual for Lessons 11 & 12. During discussion of the question for [Psalm 48:13b](#), ask how music can be part of the "telling" process.

God continued to be their king and their fortress, even after the city walls were demolished by a foreign army. The subsequent exile challenged Israel's confidence in God, but he proved his loyalty to them time and again—even as their disloyalty resulted in their own demise.

Today, we serve our Lord Jesus, who expressed his loyalty to us through his death and resurrection. We can be confident in his good rule and love for us. Our task is to pass that love and message to others ([Matthew 28:19, 20](#)). That's the greatest show of loyalty to him we can offer!

B. Prayer

Lord God, you are our mighty king. We thank you for the ways you've protected us throughout the years. We thank you for governing us with holiness and righteousness. May everything we do, think, and say be an expression of our love for you. We pray in the name of King Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God's protection is an expression of his love.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible](#)
Student

Into the Lesson

Form learners into pairs. Then say, “I am going to name a location, and you and your partner have 15 seconds to come up with the name of a famous wall there. The wall can be from the past or present. But here’s the tough part: you cannot talk to your partner. You must share thoughts in writing back and forth until you agree on an answer. We’ll go over correct answers after I’ve given you seven locations. Remember, you will work in silence the entire time.”

As you read off the following locations, pause for 15 seconds after each for pairs to reach consensus: China, Germany, Croatia, England, Turkey, Iraq, Jerusalem. (*Expected responses, respectively:* the Great Wall, the Berlin Wall, the Walls of Ston, Hadrian’s Wall, the Walls of Troy, the Walls of Babylon, the Western or Wailing Wall.)

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Follow the Leader?” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download, for learners to complete as indicated. (*Option.* Make this exercise harder by removing the rightmost column,

thereby turning a challenge of matching into fill-in-the-blank.) As you discuss answers, ask learners which leader they would most and least liked to have lived under.

After either activity, make a transition by saying: “Let’s take a look at how the psalmist uses his praise of Mount Zion (the city of Jerusalem) and elements of its wall to express his praise for God, the ultimate leader worthy of following.”

Into the Word

Have volunteers take turns reading the eight verses of [Psalm 48:1-3, 9-14](#). Give a mini-lecture on why Mount Zion was God’s holy mountain, the focal point of honoring his unmatched character and power.

Give each participant a handout (you prepare) on which is printed the lesson text. Then form learners into groups of two or three; give each group three fine-tip markers or ballpoint pens in the colors of green, red, and black. Write these three categories on the board:

Praise for God

Praise for Mount Zion (Jerusalem)

Praise for the City’s Defensive Structures

In addition to featuring the lesson text, the handouts should instruct groups to underline in green those phrases in

the text that correspond with the first category, red for phrases that correspond with the second, and black for phrases that correspond with the third.

In the discussion that ensues after groups finish, explore how the psalmist intertwines the three categories. Make sure to bring this “what’s so” discussion to its ideal conclusion of application by asking “So what?” That will serve as your transition to the Into Life segment.

Into Life

Write on the board, or distribute on handouts (you prepare) the following descriptions of God:

PRINCE OF PEACE

RIGHTEOUS

ALL-POWERFUL

INFINITE

SAVIOR

EVERLASTING FATHER

Challenge learners to write a brief prayer of praise that uses each description of God at least once. (*Option.* Explore the what, why, and how of praise distractions by having learners complete the “Be an Overcomer” activity from the reproducible page.) Close with this prayer: “Lord, may we be ever grateful for your steadfast love and protection! As we reflect on your provisions, we are especially thankful for these things. [*Pause to*

allow learners to list things silently.] In the matchless name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.”