A scenic view of a city skyline at sunset over a body of water, with a teal kayak in the foreground. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and purple, with the sun low on the horizon. The city lights are visible in the distance, and the water reflects the colors of the sky. The kayak is in the foreground, pointing towards the horizon.

BOOKS OF THE BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

by WAYNE PALMER

P S A L M S



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INTRODUCTION

Psalms has been called the hymnbook of Israel. The very word *psalm* is a musical word that comes from a root that means “a song sung to the harp.” Clearly, these psalms were sung by the people of God.

This book is a collection of songs and prayers written by many different people of God spanning many centuries. As Jesus finished His Last Supper and prepared to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, He and His disciples sang a hymn, likely Psalm 118.

The majority of psalms were written by David; others were written by Levites whom he put in charge of worship. King Solomon wrote two (72 and 127) and Moses even wrote one (90).

It is interesting to note that many psalms have headings that give context or authorship for the psalm, such as Psalm 3, “a Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.” These headings or inscriptions are part of the sacred text inspired by the Holy Spirit. So we can depend upon them as God’s own Word, not a later editor’s best guess.

PURPOSE

Each psalm expresses the deep feelings of its composer, and thus taps into the depths of our hearts, our emotions, and our experiences. It is easy to identify with the range of emotions covered in the psalms: frustration and worry, thanksgiving and worship, begging for help or crying out for forgiveness, wondering at God’s Word and His wisdom, anger at God’s enemies, or sheer, jubilant praise. They lead us from our human experiences and struggles to God’s arms.

For this month’s study, we will focus on certain psalms that reflect this wide range of emotions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PSALM 3 “*CHRIST, MY SHIELD*”

Read the inscription for Psalm 3.

Psalm 3 was written while the events in 2 Samuel 15–16 were unfolding. David’s son Absalom, with the help of his most trusted advisor Ahithophel, had stolen the hearts of the Israelites and staged a coup to take the kingdom of Israel for himself. David, his trusted friends, and his faithful followers were fleeing for their lives.

Q 1: What emotions would you suspect David was experiencing as he wrote this psalm or song?

- David had to have been going through enormous turmoil inside—fear, hurt, shock. In David’s case, we should probably add intense guilt. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband put into the front line to be killed by the enemy, the prophet Nathan announced these very things would happen (see 2 Samuel 12:11–12). We read in this psalm that David sees them unfold.

Read Psalm 3.

David wrote this psalm on the morning of battle when his troops were getting ready to go up against Absalom’s army. Before he went to sleep, he was troubled by the number of Israelites who had joined Absalom to attack him—a vast army. But David found comfort and confidence in remembering that God was a protecting shield for him. When he laid down to sleep the night before, he slept soundly, confident in God’s protection. As he awakened and arose for the day of battle, he asked God to rise with him and strike his foes. And he asked God’s blessings to be on His people—even those who were assembling against him.

Q 2: Describe a situation in your life where you spent a restless night before some major challenge or problem. How might this psalm comfort and help you when you face something similar in the future?

- David’s fears drove him to God, his shield and protector. The Holy Spirit uses these same words to give us comfort, protection, and rest.

PSALM 18 “CHRIST, MY ROCK AND FORTRESS”

Read the inscription for Psalm 18.

David wrote this psalm the day God delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from King Saul. A quick scan of 1 Samuel 18–26 shows the deadly peril David faced as he was hunted by the entire army of King Saul. Men who were eager to improve their position with Saul betrayed David by giving information about his movements and locations. Twice King Saul’s army had David trapped and were moving in on him, but God turned the tables and Saul fell into David’s hands—yet David feared God and spared Saul’s life.

As you read David’s words, notice the powerful poetic imagery he used to convey God’s intervention—and the emotions involved. Though David used some poetic license, if you carefully consider the deadly peril he faced, you realize he was not exaggerating when he described being close to death.

Read Psalm 18.

Q 3: It is unlikely you are being chased down by a jealous king and his entire army, but all of us face enemies of one sort or the other. Which people or situations in your life are enemies who make your life difficult?

- Answers will vary for this. Your participants could be facing relationship problems, problems at work, financial struggles, or health problems. So, enemies could be other people or threatening circumstances.

Q 4: Sometimes we pray to God and our difficult situations don’t seem to change. We can get the impression that God is apathetic. How can God’s response to David’s prayer beginning in verse 6 give you patience as you await God’s answer to your prayer?

- God is emotionally invested in you—you are His own child purchased by Christ’s blood and sealed in the waters of Baptism. He is not slow to rescue you and resolve your prayers; He is just working everything out in His own time by His divine, fatherly wisdom.

PSALM 22 “CHRIST, MY RESCUER”

Read the inscription for Psalm 22.

Unlike the previous two psalms, this inscription does not provide us any idea of the circumstances in which David wrote this psalm. Instead, it points out that David wrote this psalm for Israel’s worship and entrusted it to the choirmaster. Apparently, the tune to which David wanted the song set was called “The Doe of the Dawn.” (Just as we may decide to sing an unfamiliar hymn to a more familiar hymn tune that has the same meter.)

This psalm is an amazing messianic prophecy from King David. Nearly a thousand years before the time of Christ, David described our Savior’s sufferings in amazing detail.

Read Psalm 22.

Q 5: What alternating pattern do you see in the words of this psalm?

- We see how David describes his present sufferings for several verses and then shifts his focus to God as he calls out for help. Then David returns to his present sufferings. In those sections where David discusses God’s faithfulness, he first describes God’s works, then describes His reputation, and then pleads for God to help him. Then when he is confident of God’s deliverance, he finally offers a vow or promise that he will tell the great assembly (the Church) what God has done for him.

Q 6: What striking details describe what Jesus felt and saw at His crucifixion?

- The mockery, laughing, and insults of the people around Him; the stress on all of His joints from the weight of His body pulling on the nails in His hands; the nails piercing His hands and feet; His great thirst; His clothes being divided among the soldiers, and even people casting lots for his long tunic.

Q 7: Where can we see hints of Jesus’ resurrection in this psalm?

- Beginning in verse 22, Jesus talks about what He will do after His resurrection: “I will tell of Your name to My brothers.”

PSALM 23 “CHRIST, MY SHEPHERD”

Read the inscription for Psalm 23.

Of the psalms we have studied so far, this inscription is the shortest. It merely identifies the author of this psalm as David. Many psalms have no inscription whatsoever, so we do not know their authors.

This is the beloved Psalm 23, a wonderful complement to Jesus’ words in John 10:11, “I am the good shepherd.”

Read Psalm 23.

It is easy to picture David composing this psalm as he watched over his sheep. Perhaps the thought crossed his mind that his relationship to his sheep was similar to God’s relationship to him and all believers.

Q 8: Why do you think this psalm is loved by so many Christians?

- David beautifully captured the personal nature of God’s care for each of us and applied it to himself. The reader can take those personal pronouns (I, me, mine) and suddenly see his or her relationship with Christ Jesus in a new way.

Q 9: Choose a verse that especially speaks to your life right now and share it with the group.

- David masterfully takes us through every stage of life and shows us how Jesus is always there for us, leading us to eternal life. As we pass through particular stages (perhaps the valley of the shadow of death) and look forward to others (maybe heaven), David’s words take on special meaning and give tremendous encouragement, hope, and peace.

PSALM 27 “CHRIST, MY LIGHT AND SALVATION”

Read the inscription for Psalm 27.

The only thing we learn from this inscription is that David was the composer.

Read Psalm 27.

There are two parts to this psalm. The first shows confidence in God (vv. 1–6). The second cries out to Him in prayer and then calls us to wait patiently for God to answer our prayers.

Q 10: David expresses great confidence in the victory God will give him over his enemies. Where does David find this confidence?

- He finds this confidence in worship as he stands in the Lord's house, recalls His mighty deeds of old, and hears God's great promises to him. We also can find that great comfort in worship, especially as God lifts us above our day-to-day problems and shows us an eternal perspective—our blessed future in heaven.

Q 11: What does David mean when he writes, “Hide not Your face from me” (v. 9)?

- If God were to hide His face, we could never find Him. And He would not see what we are going through—nor would He see or hear us calling out to Him for help and salvation. The Benediction assures us this won't happen, “The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:26).

Q 12: What does David mean when he tells us, “Wait for the LORD!”?

- We often pray to God and grow impatient if He does not resolve our situation instantly. David encourages us to be patient. This grows from the confidence given in the first six verses of this psalm. God is with us. He has already delivered us from our eternal enemies through His Son's death and resurrection. We can be confident God will answer our prayers, so as God makes all things work together to answer our prayer in the way that best serves His good purposes for us, we can excitedly wait and watch for His deliverance to unfold when His time is right.

PSALM 46 “*CHRIST, MY REFUGE AND STRENGTH*”

Read the inscription for Psalm 46.

This psalm was not written by David but by the Sons of Korah. These were Levites whom David had made temple musicians. This psalm speaks of the people of God in great jeopardy, yet having no reason to fear because God is with them to protect and defend them.

Read Psalm 46.

God's presence is key to this psalm and the great comfort it gives us. Martin Luther wrote his famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” from the phrase “God is our refuge and strength” (v. 1).

Q 13: What does it mean to you that God is “a very present help in trouble” (v. 1)?

- This phrase will mean different things to different people. But it emphasizes that God is always here with us, never far away as we might imagine. Of course, if we think in a Law orientation, that can be scary. God is always here as witness and judge of all I do or say. But through Christ’s suffering and death in our place, this is now very comforting Gospel. Because God has forgiven all our sins and accepted us as His own children, we can have great confidence no matter what crisis we may face in life because we know God is right there with us to help us.

Q 14: What does the phrase “Be still, and know that I am God” (v. 10) mean to you?

- In the context of this psalm, it is intended in a Law-oriented sense because it is spoken to the enemies who are threatening God’s people. The Lord is telling them to cease their hostility. Jesus would use the same words to still the storms on the Sea of Galilee.
- But the Bible also uses these words in a Gospel-oriented sense at times. When Israel left Egypt and was trapped on the shore of the Red Sea, God told Moses the Israelites need not fear. They would not have to fight this battle. They only needed to be still and watch God deliver His people.

PSALM 51 “*CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD*”

Read the inscription for Psalm 51.

This is a gut-wrenching inscription. Here, David’s sin is laid bare for everyone to see for every generation until the end of time (see 2 Samuel 11:1–12:25). In 2 Samuel 12:1–13, Nathan spent twelve verses exposing David’s sin and leading him to repentance and confession. David’s confession was incredibly short: “I have sinned against the LORD.” The prophet Nathan’s absolution was also short: “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die” (v. 13).

But this psalm (along with Psalm 32) shows the depth of guilt, grief, sorrow, and repentance that were in David’s few words. This psalm has brought such comfort to troubled sinners. We can make the prayer of a repentant David our own confession—and often do in the liturgies of the Church.

Read Psalm 51.

Notice the sincerity of David's repentance. In three different, very visual ways, he pleads for God to take away his sins—"blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" (vv. 1-2). David is haunted by his sin, which is "ever before" him (v. 3). Then, like the repentant thief on the cross, David confesses God is right to judge him guilty.

Q 15: Why is it so hard to simply admit we have done wrong and refrain from adding a qualification or excuse?

- When we confess sins to other people, we don't want them to think we are so foul and monstrous. If we provide an excuse, shift the blame a bit, or qualify our actions, we don't look so evil. But David knew that there was no excuse for what he had done, no way to qualify it or shift the blame. The repentant criminal next to Jesus on the cross did the same thing.
- David goes even deeper. He knows his sin is greater than the sum of his misdeeds and the good things God has commanded that he has left undone. All those sins of commission and omission are only the symptoms of the deeper corruption inside—the sinful nature that has been inside him since he was conceived in his mother's womb.
- The key to repentance is being open and honest before God and then quickly turning our attention from ourselves to our gracious God, asking Him to act in mercy and grace toward us.
- In verses 16-17, David makes a striking claim. God does not delight in the animal sacrifices His Old Testament people brought—He delights in a broken spirit, and He does not despise a broken and contrite heart.

Q 16: How does confession become easier when we realize God honors and delights in our true repentance and contrition (wishing we could undo some evil thing we have done)?

- Because we don't have to pretend to be something we aren't, we don't have to cover up and hide part of who we really are. We can be open and honest with God, knowing with certainty that He loves us and wants to forgive us for Jesus' sake.

PSALM 103 “*BLESSED IN CHRIST*”

The inscription for this psalm is brief and to the point: “Of David.” It is a magnificent psalm that reminds us of so many reasons we should bless and praise our Lord.

Read Psalm 103.

In the first fourteen verses, David gives us a compelling list of the blessings God gives and for which He deserves our praise.

Q 17: Which part of this list stands out to you?

- Answers will vary. But when the participants are done, remind them that they should add all of these blessings together to see the totality of the many things God does for each of us out of His undeserved, fatherly love.

Beginning in verse 15, David contrasts our feeble human powers with the steadfast love of the immortal, eternal God.

Q 18: Why do we need a reminder of our creaturely limitations?

- If God is as frail and temporary as humans are, we are in dire trouble. Thankfully, we have a God who is almighty, all-wise, and eternal. When we consider our frail bodies and feeble reasoning powers, it is comforting to know that we have an all-wise, all-powerful God to deal with the tough challenges of life.

PSALM 110 “*CHRIST, MY HIGH PRIEST*”

Jesus used the first verse of this psalm during Holy Week to point to the mystery that He is both God and man.

Read the inscription and verse 1 of Psalm 110.

The brief inscription to this psalm becomes critically important for properly interpreting the persons being addressed in the first verse of this psalm. “The LORD says to my Lord . . .”

Q 19: Which persons of the Trinity are indicated by the words *LORD* and *Lord*?

- The narrator, David, is looking on at two pronouncements from

God the Father to His Son, the promised Christ. The first name “LORD” refers to God the Father; the second “Lord” refers to the Christ. When Jesus used this first verse to speak to the Jewish leaders, He made the point that the Messiah must be more than a mere man for David to refer to Him as “my Lord.” In Jewish thought, no descendant could ever be greater than his ancestor. So if David acknowledged that his Son was also his Lord, then the Messiah must be the Son of God.

Read the rest of Psalm 110.

In a sense, David wrote this psalm to describe the work of his promised Son, the Messiah. It hinges around the Father’s pronouncements to His Son in verses 1 and 4.

Q 20: Which parts of this psalm speak to the Christ’s divinity and which speak to His humanity?

- “Sit at My right hand” speaks to Jesus’ divine nature, while His human enemies and the phrase, “He will drink from the brook by the way” refers to Jesus’ humanity. The psalm speaks of the opposition Jesus faced from resistant humans—yet it prophesies His complete victory on the cross and His resurrection and ascension, where He took His place at the right hand of His Father in heaven, now ruling all things on earth by the authority given to Him by God the Father (see Matthew 28:18).

PSALM 119 “*CHRIST, THE WORD OF GOD*”

Psalm 119 is a poetic masterpiece, examining and unfolding the wonder of Scriptures, the amazing word of God. The psalm is like an ABC book as the Hebrew works its way through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet through its division into twenty-two sections composed of eight verses each. The first letter of the eight verses in each section begins with the same letter of the alphabet. (The English Standard Version includes the name of each Hebrew letter in a header over each section.)

One commentator has pointed out that this psalm beautifully portrays the way our Savior Jesus Christ felt toward the Scriptures. Think of His amazing knowledge and love of the Scriptures as Jesus questioned the chief priests in the temple courts as a twelve-year-old (see Luke 2:41–51).

Instead of studying the entire psalm at this point, we will look at two key sections.

Read Psalm 119:9–16.

Q 21: How does this section highlight the value of memorizing Scripture?

- When God’s Word is memorized (stored up in our hearts), it is always at hand, ready to guide our thoughts, mold our daily perspective, point out our footsteps, and protect us from destructive temptations and selfish desires. Jesus’ mother, Mary, did this as she memorized the sequence of events of Jesus’ birth: “But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). The psalmist points out how wise it is especially for young, inexperienced Christians to memorize God’s Word.

Read Psalm 119:105–112.

Q 22: What mental scene or picture comes to your mind when you read, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105)?

- This beautiful poetry creates many different mental pictures—possibly a believer trying to follow a narrow, difficult path on a dark night. The bottom line is that we need God’s Word to show us the true path to walk in our lives. Without its guidance, we will surely trip up and fall.

PSALM 121 “*CHRIST, MY HELP*”

Read the inscription for Psalm 121.

If you glance at the inscriptions for Psalms 120–134, you’ll notice they each share this same phrase, “A Song of Ascents.” This title refers to pilgrims going up to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. We do not know exactly which “ascent” is meant by this phrase, but there are two possibilities. One meaning is that it refers to the general climb as pilgrims made their way up the mountains of Judea to Mount Zion on which the temple was built. The second meaning is a temple stairway, fifteen steps that led up from the Court of the Women to the Court of the Israelites in Herod’s temple. These psalms are all quite different from one another, but each talks about Zion and Jerusalem.

Read Psalm 121.

The “ascent” part of this psalm is found right away in the first verse, as the psalmist lifts up his eyes to the hills of Jerusalem as he makes his way up to the temple.

Q 23: In verse 4, what is the comfort of knowing God neither slumbers nor sleeps?

- It is not hard to imagine the danger that would come to a family, city, or military post if the watchmen fell asleep. We all know the difficulty of being watchful and vigilant when we are drowsy. It is a great comfort to know God never slumbers or sleep—He is always there to guard us, provide for us, and answer our prayers.

Q 24: In verses 5–8, the psalmist presents several ways in which God keeps His children. Which of these images gives you the greatest comfort?

- Answers will vary, but each provides a beautiful picture.
 - A keeper is like a bodyguard or watchman whose sole concern is the safety of the person he is keeping watch over. While we are busy focusing on providing for our families and serving our neighbors, God is busy watching our enemies and protecting and guarding us.
 - God shades us from the sun and moon. The sun’s heat can be deadly—as we know on many summer days. But the ancient people also may have feared the eerie light of the moon.
 - “The LORD will keep your going out and coming in.” Whether we are leaving our house for school, work, or other business, God is guarding us. And when we return home at the end of the day, God is there.

PSALM 136 “O GIVE THANKS!”

This beautiful psalm is perfect for Thanksgiving as it focuses our thoughts and attention on God’s work and the love that lies behind all God does for His dearly loved people.

Read Psalm 136.

After establishing God’s superiority to every man-made god, the psalm speaks of God’s work in creation, in freeing Israel from its slavery in Egypt, and in faithfully bringing His people through the wilderness to the Promised Land. It closes with God’s reign in heaven—a reminder of our eternal future in God’s glorious presence.

Q 25: When so much of our day-to-day life focuses on the things we do or must do, why is it refreshing to read a psalm that speaks exclusively about the great works God does?

- Life can be exhausting for us—especially when we feel we are carrying the weight of the world. This psalm makes us step back

and lay that burden on Jesus' shoulders—as we remember God is the one providing for us and our families, giving us the strength to do the good works He has prepared for us to do.

Q 26: How does it readjust your thinking to hear the repeated refrain “for His steadfast love endures forever” in each verse of this psalm?

- We easily forget God's steadfast, unchanging love, grace, and mercy, which bless each of our days. We are forgetful of His grace, especially when we are going through difficult times and God seems to be absent—like the enslaved Israelites in Egypt or the hardships of the Israelites in the wilderness. The repetition of this phrase drives the thought down deep in our mind that underlying everything we face is God's love, which will never change. That love is anchored in the cross and empty tomb of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

PSALM 137 “A CURSE PSALM”

We close our brief study on the Psalms with a shocking kind of psalm that is very uncomfortable for many Christians—the curse psalm (also known as an imprecatory psalm). (Other imprecatory psalms include 35; 55; 59; 69; 79; 109.) Of what possible use can these psalms be to Christians today?

Read Psalm 137:7–9.

We jumped right to the curse because it is so shocking it overrides our senses and drowns out the rest of the psalm, which helps provide the context that gave rise to this curse. Part of the reason it is so shocking is because it doesn't seem to match Jesus' command to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Now that the shock is out of your system, let's go back and read about the context.

Read Psalm 137:1–3.

We see a moment of bitter pain as the exiles of Jerusalem and Judea were dragged from their homes to the strange and scary land of Babylon. In cruel mockery, the Babylonians—their violent, godless captors—heartlessly demanded joyous songs of worship from the grieving, devastated Jews.

The curse welled up from the deep pain and misery of this trauma. There was a helpless feeling in the exiles—compounded by a recognition of their guilt and idolatry, which brought on this bitter defeat and persecution.

We may experience moments like this if we suffer violent trauma—natural disasters, crime, abuse, violent persecution, and the like.

Read Psalm 137:4–6.

In this section, we read of the exiles' pledge not to forget Jerusalem and everything God did for His people there—the temple, the worship, the sacrifices, and the Word of God, which the exiles had cast aside in their sin.

Now reread Psalm 137:7–9.

Notice the first verse calls upon God to punish the Edomites. These were descendants of Jacob's twin brother, Esau, who were so hateful and jealous of their brothers that they carefully watched the Jewish fugitives fleeing from Jerusalem and betrayed them to the Babylonian forces seeking their lives.

The next two verses deal with the Babylonians, who gleefully poured out their wrath on the Jews who were conquered.

Q 27: Where does this psalm direct the suffering people of God to turn their hurt, pain, and anger?

- It is unhealthy to bottle up these powerful emotions and the pain they cause. It is also bad to take matters into our hands and try to avenge the wrongs done to us. Curse psalms turn suffering believers away from taking matters into their own hands and violently attacking their enemies. Instead, they provide a channel directing us to bring our powerful emotions to God in prayer as we call on Him to act on our behalf. They also remind us that we are precious in God's eyes—even though it may seem like we matter little to God if He permits us to suffer so greatly. They encourage us to follow the words of Romans 12, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (v. 19).

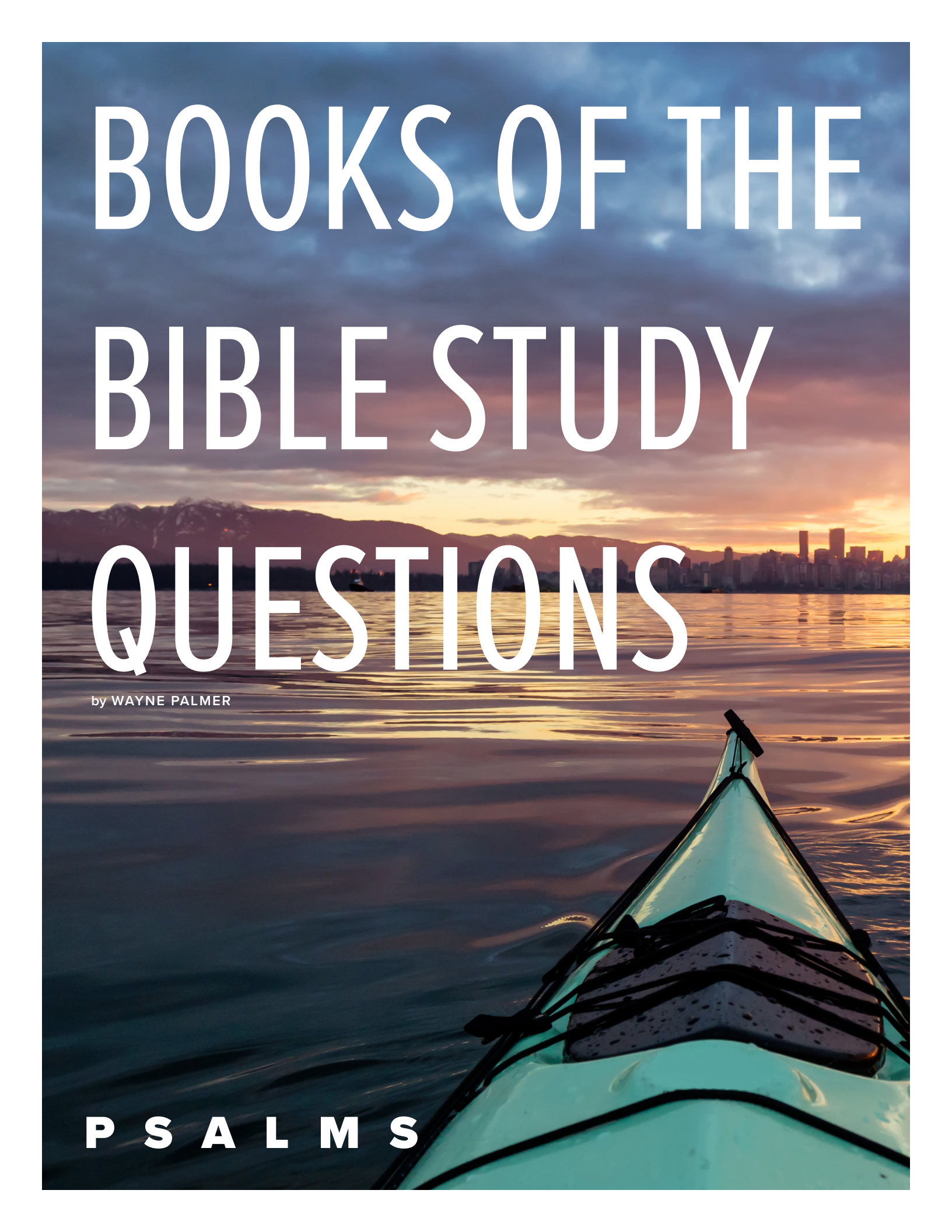
Q 28: In what sense do these curses reflect the eternal punishment of sin and unbelief in hell?

- Just as God devastated Egypt through the plagues—especially the tenth plague on the firstborn in Egypt—when Judgment Day comes, God will pour out His unrelenting wrath on unbelievers in the eternal flames of hell. There will be absolutely no mercy, no grace, no pity for those who rejected God's gracious offer of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Q 29: What then should we make of Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?

- The New Testament adds an interesting and wonderful new dimension to this discussion. In the moments of bitter grief and pain that immediately follow violent trauma or crime we suffer, when we feel a deep need for vengeance, imprecatory psalms provide a way for the burning wrath to be channeled out of our heart. As we go forward and pray and read psalms of hope and

forgiveness, God can bring the healing Gospel to reassure us we are forgiven, God is gracious, and the Lord can implant a love for even our enemies who act in unbelief and ignorance. Jesus paid the price of their sin on the cross—so like Jesus and like Stephen who followed His example, we can eventually pray for our persecutors and those who hurt us bitterly.

A scenic view of a city skyline at sunset over a body of water, with a teal kayak in the foreground. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and purple, with the sun low on the horizon. The city skyline is visible in the distance, and the water reflects the colors of the sky. The kayak is in the foreground, pointing towards the horizon.

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