

The Turning God

Psa 85:4 (BHS)

אַסַּפְתָּ כָּל־עֲבָרֹתַי
הַשִּׁבוֹת
מִחֲרוֹן אַפְּךָ:

Psa 85:3 (NKJV)

You have taken away all Your wrath;
You have **turned**
from the fierceness of Your anger.

When I teach Psalms, there is a point when I treat the students to what I call “raw theology.” What I mean by this is theology that the psalm asserts but that has not made its way into a chapter in the Confession or Institutes, which no heretic has ever denied so no church council has had to formally defend. Theology that is rich and profound but relatively uninteresting from a Systematics viewpoint. In a word, “Biblical theology.” Okay, two words.

So. One has to learn to read the Bible without filtering this great stuff out. It is not easy to do. So to help me access it, I created a Hebrew concordance of just the Psalter. I then analyzed the whole book word by word, looking for repeated words in consecutive verses. My theory is, if a word is repeated verse after verse, it is probably meaningful. I made some significant discoveries this way. [Here](#) is a link to one of them. This essay treats another.

The word in our verse highlighted in red, *shūb* (say, “shoove”) is translated “**turned**.” This is repeated 5 times in 8 verses. *Shūb* forms a key word here, together constituting a theological theme. In New King James it reads as follows:

- ¹ You, LORD, showed favor to your land;
you **restored** the fortunes of Jacob.
- ² You forgave the iniquity of your people
and covered all their sins.
- ³ You set aside all your wrath
and **turned** from your fierce anger.
- ⁴ **Restore** us again, God our Savior,
and put away your displeasure toward us.
- ⁵ Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger through all generations?
- ⁶ Will you not **revive** us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
- ⁷ Show us your unfailing love, LORD,
and grant us your salvation.
- ⁸ I will listen to what God the LORD says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—
but let them not **turn** to folly.

Observe that the word used here for humans changing is also used for Yahweh turning from wrath. He changes his countenance toward us, and also we change. In these verses, when his people change in a positive direction, it is Yahweh who changes them. In verses 1 and 4 this change is glossed “restore,” in v. 6, “revive.” The one place where people change themselves, v. 8, it is to turn negatively to folly.

We are used to thinking of God as being unchangeable. His character doesn't vary (Jms 1:17). But that is not what this psalm is talking about. Instead, it is talking about what *does* change. God turns from his wrath to unfailing love, and he positively turns us to correct what we foolishly made of ourselves. Let us with the psalmist celebrate and worship the God who turns! But let us also take inventory, so we don't turn to folly.

Of course these themes are deeply explored in the New Testament. All of us were in the category of being under God's wrath. We were "children of wrath" (Eph 2:3). After delineating all sorts of ungodly behaviors—that we all have committed over and over—Paul writes, "We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things" (Rom 2:2). And yet it is hard to find in the NT a verse about God's wrath that doesn't have right along with it the accomplished fact of Psa 85:2 above, "You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins." We know what the psalmist didn't, that this was accomplished through Jesus suffering the wrath of God on the cross. Now that sin is covered, our experience of God is quite different than the psalmist's, isn't it? We need not plead with God to turn from his anger. We are reconciled.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Rom 5:8 – 10)

The Christian life is about change. Some agencies of change are the means of grace, like the preaching of the Word, church discipline, and subjection to one another.

The change process can be painful and humbling. But it won't last forever. The day will come when Jesus will finally and definitively change us once and for all. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!