

Behold the Love of God

From the Book of Acts

By Dennis Prutow

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Bible Text: Acts 14:13-15; Isaiah 53:3-6;11

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Westminster Evangelistic Ministries

Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

7418 Penn Avenue

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15208

Website: www.wordfortheweek.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/rptsprof

Turn now in your Bibles, if you would, to the 14th chapter of Acts. We'll read a few verses from Acts 14, verses 13-15.

The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them."¹

Let us pray together.

Father, again, it is a privilege for us to have an opportunity to look into your Word, to speak about the good things that concern you. And we pray that in these next moments as we are together that you would be pleased to bless us. Bless us in our thinking. Bless us in our emotions. Bless us in the depths of our hearts and our wills that we might turn to you fully, to serve you completely, knowing that you are the living God and that you have been pleased to come to us even though we as sinful fallen creatures are far from you. You have been pleased to come to us in Christ Jesus to lift us up. You have stooped low to come to our aid. Thank you. Bless us that we might have a better understanding of this now we pray in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

When you work with little children, it is quite helpful to stoop down to get on their level, to get on your hands and knees so that you can look eyeball to eyeball with the little folks. And when this occurs and you embrace the little folks, you might get this response, as I often get in our household.

“I love you, papa.”

¹ Acts 14:13-15.

And this is the response when you stoop down and then you embrace the little one on his or her level.

And so it is with our God who is high and exalted, great in might and splendor. We just read about this in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 2. Great in might and splendor, God is in many ways incomprehensible. That is, we cannot get our hands around him and our minds around him. He reveals himself to us. We can comprehend him as he reveals himself to us. But he is incomprehensible because we cannot get our hands around him; we cannot know him fully. He must stoop low to get down to our level and look at us eyeball to eyeball. And he does this. Amazingly enough he does this in the person of Jesus Christ. As Jesus Christ comes into the world and takes on human flesh and human emotions and embraces us, we know that God loves us.

This is how the incomprehensible God ultimately reveals himself. And, thus, we behold the love of God; when he comes down to us and takes on flesh and human emotions in order to suffer for us. And this is the point that I want you to get this morning from the sermon. I would like you to behold the love of God in Jesus Christ as he takes on human flesh and human emotions for the very purpose of embracing you in his love by dying for you, to behold the love of God taking on human flesh and human emotions. Behold the love of God, Jesus Christ taking human flesh and human emotions to suffer for you.

In order to get this I think we need to start on our level. We need to begin with you and me, the fact that we are very human creatures.

“Well,” you say, “that’s pretty obvious.”

But let’s just review it for a moment. We are very human creatures. You need food. I need food. You need water. I need water. You need sleep. I need sleep. And sleep deprivation is not helpful on the following day for any of us.

If you prick my finger, if you prick your finger, what happens? You bleed. We are very human creatures.

If you fall, what happens? You get a bruise. You may break a bone. And for the elderly, often the process is not falling and breaking a bone, but the hip breaks and then you fall. This is the process.

We are subject to diseases and infirmities, to colds and flues. We fail. Our bodies fail. Our joints fail.

My youngest brother, who is 15 years younger than I am, has two hip replacements and a shoulder replacement. The bionic age is upon us in many ways. We ultimately fail in every respect. All of our organs will fail and we will turn to dust. We are very human creatures.

And we not only have these physical characteristics, but we also have emotional characteristics. Is this not the case?

We have what we call human emotions or passions. This is the way the Bible puts it. The word “passions” really refers to the emotions. We have feelings.

You know the saying. “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” Oh, really? If you are like me, the names do hurt. They penetrate the heart. They pierce the heart. And the reason is that we are emotional creatures. We have these emotions.

We also have consciences. And if you do something bad, how do you feel? You feel bad or at least you should feel bad. And when you do something good what is the result? You feel differently. You feel good. You see, this is part of your emotional make up.

You feel sorrow. You feel grief. Two or three years ago we had a little incident in our family. Our youngest daughter came to visit with us with her husband and her cocker spaniel puppy. We had given the dog to her some 15 years earlier. So the dog was a little elderly and a little senile. But, of course, when you have a little mutt like this you love it. And so off to the store they go. Down to the Waterfront they go and dad is left. “Will you keep the dog? Will you watch the dog?”

“Sure, I’ll watch the dog.”

And here the little dog wanders around the back yard and falls into the neighbor’s lily pond. And after fishing her out, I have to call my daughter and say, “Kristi, Tikvah is no longer with us.”

Well, of course there was grief on her part. But I was grieving because I was the one who was responsible and I failed. And so there was no small amount of grief on my part.

We are subject to phobias, different kinds of fears. I told you the little story about going out into the woods with my mother and running across a snake. And I ran away and left my mother standing there in the woods with the snake. We all have our fears and our phobias.

Some are fearful of high places. Some are fearful of elevators. You see, we are filled with all these kinds of emotions. We can be happy and we can be sad. We can be very depressed or we can be exuberant. We can be angry and we can be very forgiving. We are very often quite emotional. And emotions are good. We are made this way. This is part of how God has made us. And we need to understand that this is the case.

But part of what you need to understand and part of what I need to understand is that God is quite different. The children’s catechism says, “God is a Spirit and does not have a body like men” or women or children. God is a Spirit and does not have a body.

But here is the interesting and significant thing. When we read the Bible, what do we read? Well, we read things in the Bible about God's hands. God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt with a strong hand.² And we read in the Bible about God's eyes. God's eyes go to and fro throughout the earth.³ We read about God's ears. And the Psalms speak about God hearing our prayers with his ears. And the psalmist pleads with God to hear his prayers with his ears.⁴

And, again, the Bible speaks about God's strong arm. And we think of the deliverance of God by his outstretched arm.⁵ And the Bible... well, we don't get this in the English version, but did you know that the Bible speaks about God's nostrils? This is an striking picture, the flare of the nostrils which portrays anger. And we read about the mouth of the Lord. The mouth of the Lord has spoken it.⁶

Well, you understand, do you not? I think this is fairly easy for you to get. It is pretty easy for you to understand that these are figures of speech. God doesn't actually have eyes. He doesn't actually have ears. He doesn't actually have a mouth. He doesn't actually have hands and arms and legs. These are metaphors. These are figures of speech. This is a way that we understand God, a way that God teaches us. There is a comparison being made between us and God. This is pretty easy for us to grasp.

But this is also important for you to grasp and for me to grasp because if you don't understand this is the case, you can run afoul of the Bible. And a cult, the Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, teach that God does have a body. They take these terms in the Bible literally rather than as figures of speech. So it is important that we understand that this is these figures of speech.

But now we come to a little bit more difficult area in our discussion. God is also quite different from each of us in that God does not have *human* emotions. Now, I want you to hear me on this. God, the most pure Spirit, does not have *human* emotions.

We read the Westminster Confession of Faith just a little bit ago. The Westminster Confession of Faith says, that, God "is a most pure spirit without body, parts, or passions." We understand the body part. And we understand the parts part. In other words, God is not divisible. But he is also without passions. And the word "passions" here, as I indicated earlier, means emotions. God is without human emotions.

The proof text for this statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith is in Acts 14 which I read just moments ago. And I would like you to turn there with me in your Bibles, if you would, to Acts 14. I want to look just at a couple of verses in Acts chapter 14. You remember the scene. Paul and Barnabas had come to Lystra. By God's grace

² See Deuteronomy 4:34.

³ See 2 Chronicles 16:9.

⁴ See Psalm 130:2.

⁵ See Exodus 6:6.

⁶ See Isaiah 1:20.

they performed a miracle and then the people came out to worship, to worship Paul and Barnabas saying, “The gods...have come down to us.”⁷

Verse 13-15 in Acts 14,

The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you.”⁸

This is how the *New American Standard Version* reads and this is how the *English Standard Version* reads. “We are not gods. We are men of the same *nature* as you.”⁹

The King James Version is more literal here. “We also are men of like *passions* with you.”¹⁰ In other words, Paul and Barnabas state they are not gods. Quite to the contrary, we are like you, they say. We have the same emotional make up as you do. We are of like passions with you. We are not gods.

And the Westminster divines, as they write the Westminster Confession of Faith, are picking up this idea. They are indicating that God, who is a most pure Spirit, does not have passions or emotions like we do. This is the contrast the text makes.

Now this is a difficult area for us. I acknowledge this is the case. It is not easy. But it is quite like the fact that God is a most pure Spirit. He doesn't have ears and eyes and a nose or hands or feet. God is quite different than we are. And we have to understand this is the case. He is without body, parts, or passions.

Now let me try and explain it this way. With emotions, your emotions, with human emotions, there is always a significant action that is associated with the emotion. For example, I'm sorry to pick on you young people, but when two young people have a liking for one another, what happens? We all know what happens. There is an emotional response, correct? And there might be a little warmness of heart and a little flush on the cheeks. And the emotions are engaged.

Now what happens if a third party intrudes upon this relationship? Oh, the jealousy can erupt quite easily, can it not? And when the jealousy erupts, often actions are taken.

“You get away from my boyfriend.”

This action is associated with the emotion.

⁷ Acts 14:11.

⁸ Acts 13:13-15.

⁹ See Acts 13:15, italics added.

¹⁰ Acts 13:15, italics added.

Shift gears with me now. When God takes drastic action against Israel because of Israel's idolatry, the Bible associates this action with an emotion. The Bible associates this action with an emotion and calls it jealousy.

Let's take another example. The Bible says, "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated."¹¹ Here the Bible is talking about God taking the action of rejecting Esau. This is a stark action. This is an action of rejecting Esau on one hand, and on the other hand, this is the action of embracing Jacob. And when God takes this drastic action of rejecting Esau, we associate the emotion of hatred with this action. And this is what the Bible is talking about. There is an association of the emotion with an action. And this is how we come to understand God.

Let me give you another example. When Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches, the Bible says God changes his mind and repents with regard to the Ninevites. But does God really change his mind? The Bible also says, "God is not a man..."¹² Do you hear that? "God is not a man... that he should repent."¹³

And when, on an earthly plain, on an earthly level, we see God take this action with regard to the Ninevites, the Bible calls this a change of mind, repentance. But actually, and this is the hard part for us, this is another figure of speech. This is another metaphor. This is true because, God is without body parts or passions. It is another way of speaking about God. When the Bible speaks about God having ears and eyes and a nose, we recognize the figurative language. In like manner, when the Bible speaks about God's repentance or God's hatred, we should recognize the figurative language.

In discussing these matters in class one of the men asked a perceptive question. "Does God feel love?"

I responded, "If what you mean is the feeling that those two young people have with regard to one another, which we often call puppy love, my answer is no. God does not have human emotions."

And then I asked this question: "How do you know the love of God?"

The apostle Paul answers, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."¹⁴

How do we understand this concept of love with regard to God? It is by his actions. It is by the actions he takes, you see. And there we have what we have been talking about, emotion connected with an action.

¹¹ See Romans 9:13.

¹² Numbers 23:19.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Romans 5:8.

Now why is this important? This is important on one hand because we get an idea of the transcendence of God, the greatness of God, how far above us in many respects God actually is. And on the other hand we get a better grasp of Jesus Christ. What does God necessarily have to do if he is going to stoop down and get on your eye level with you? What does God necessarily have to do? God necessarily has to take on human flesh and human emotions to stoop down and get on your level.

And this is where Isaiah 53 comes in to play. Yes, I know, we have taken some time to get here. But I want you to see Jesus Christ now.

Look at Isaiah 53 with me, would you please? Isaiah 53 verses three through six.

He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.¹⁵

He was pierced through for our transgressions. How is it possible for the God of heaven, incomprehensible, a most pure spirit, to be pierced through for your transgressions and for my transgressions? He must come down from heaven and he must take to himself a body just like yours. He must take to himself an emotional complex just like yours. He must become you; he must become a man.

How is it possible for him to suffer in any other way than to take on this body? Think of it, friends. Jesus Christ was given up in a trial before the chief priests and with false witnesses. He was turned over to the Roman governor Pilate. And Pilate had him scourged with whips so that his flesh was torn and bleeding.

Now how is this possible? How is it possible for God to suffer? He has to take on a human body just like yours. This is the only possible way.

How is it possible for him to bleed? Only by taking on human flesh just like yours. And so, when that crown of thorns was pressed upon his head and not only the sweat, but the

¹⁵ Isaiah 53:3-6.

trickles of blood came down his brow, it was because God in heaven who is without body parts or passions took to himself a true body and a reasonable soul so that he could actually, so he could actually, suffer for you and for me.

And it wasn't only bodily suffering for which Jesus came. This to me is the amazing part. It was not just bodily suffering. It was the suffering of soul through which Jesus Christ walked.

Look at Isaiah again. "He was a man of sorrows,"¹⁶ Isaiah 53:3 says. He was "Acquainted with grief."¹⁷

When Jesus Christ went to the tomb of Lazarus, the Gospel of John records two little words, "Jesus wept."¹⁸ It wasn't just a couple of tears that easily trickled down his cheek. I imagine that Jesus sobbed as he wept over Lazarus. And then he went to Gethsemane. And the Bible says he sweat, as it were, great drops of blood. Now why would a person, why would a man, sweat blood? It was because of his agony, his agony of soul.

Look at verse 11 in Isaiah chapter 53. "As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied."¹⁹

Isaiah speaks of Christ's utter agony of soul looking at the death he was about to suffer. Seeing the grief that he was about to endure, he was in great agony of soul. For the likes of you and me he did this.

And then on the cross, on the cross, he suffered the mocks and the jeers of those who were passing by. We sang a little bit about this in Psalm 22. Listen, again to one of stanzas.

Reproach of men, by all despised,
A worm and not a man am I;
All they that see me laugh in scorn;
They shake their heads and taunting cry,
"He trusts the Lord! Let him defend
And save him, if he is his friend!"²⁰

"You trust in God. Come down from the cross," was the taunt that Jesus received.

And then he died. And then he died. He died the death of a man. And his soul was separated from his body and his body was placed in a grave.

¹⁶ Isaiah 53:3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ John 11:35.

¹⁹ Isaiah 53:11.

²⁰ *The Book of Psalms for Singing*, Crown and Covenant Publications, Selection 22F.

This is what Jesus Christ came to do. He took on human flesh and human emotions to suffer bodily and to suffer in the depths of his soul. And then his own Father abandoned him and he cried out, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”²¹ You get a glimpse of his agony in this mournful cry.

And the only way, the only way that this could come about is that the God of heaven who is a most pure spirit would come down and take on a body and a soul just like yours and stoop to your level.

Have you seen the satellite pictures of the recent inauguration, the pictures of the capitol and the mall and the Washington, Monument? The picture that fascinates me is the one of the Washington Monument. You can see the shadow cast by the monument. And when you are looking down, there are thousands of people around the monument. They look like ants. They really do. They look like ants swarming on an anthill. This would be the god-ward perspective.

We are the ants milling around on the anthill. And God came down and took on human flesh and human emotions to save the likes of you and me. This is God’s love. This is God’s love for you.

God demonstrated his love in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.²² He took on that human body and that human soul for the likes of you and me.

And then Paul also says, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved *me*, and gave himself up for *me*.”²³

Behold the love of God in Jesus Christ taking on human flesh and human emotions to suffer for you and me.

Let’s pray.

Lord, how do we comprehend your goodness? Only as it is written, only as you are pleased to open our hearts and open our minds to what you have done for us in Christ. Help us, Father, weak and feeble though we be, incapable of grasping your greatness except you reveal yourself to us. Help us to understand more fully your love expressed to us in your Son taking to himself a very human body and very human emotions so that he could suffer for us.

Thank you that this is the case. Open our eyes that we might behold your love in him. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

²¹ Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.

²² See Romans 5:8.

²³ Galatians 2:20, italics added.