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WILL MY DOG GO TO HEAVEN?

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My dog is a thief. If she is in the house I can't leave any food on the bench or she will reach up when I am not looking and steal it. If she is successful in stealing it she will then immediately leave the house and go and pretend to sleep on her chair outside, and if I come outside she will look very guilty.

She is also a rogue. She knows she is not allowed on my chair. But if I am asleep she will try and sleep on my chair unless I put something in it to prevent her. Sometimes I forget to do this and I know when she has been on my chair because when I emerge from my bedroom she is standing in the middle of the lounge room looking guilty. She knows what she should and shouldn't do, and certainly expresses guilt when she has done the wrong thing.

I suspect many of you have similar tales to tell about your pets, particularly dogs. When we realize there are some animals who exhibit intelligence and other human-like behaviour, the question often arises: Does an animal have a soul? It's a question many children ask. As an adult I have asked it many times, particularly as I consider an animal, such as my current dog, that I am very fond of.

What is a soul?

A British officer in the Battle of Lake Erie, in 1812, lost an arm and a leg. He wrote to his fiancée back in England, telling her what he looked like and offering to release her from the engagement. She wrote back that so long as there was enough of him to contain a soul, they would marry.

A soul is that something about a person which is still that person no matter what else changes. The Hebrew and Greek words for "soul" are from the words meaning "to breathe." The soul is the very breath of life in a person. For those of us who believe in God we say that we have been made in the image of God and our soul also has a relationship with God.

Many of you will have heard of the story from the Bible about the Great Flood. Russell Crowe directed and starred in a film based on this story. God floods the whole planet, but preserves Noah and his family, and a pair of animals and birds of every sort, to replenish the earth once the floodwaters have gone.

After the flood has subsided and Noah, his family and all the animals and birds are preserved God promises to never destroy every living thing again through floodwaters. The rainbow becomes the sign of God's promise. Now what I find particularly interesting is that when God makes this promise he makes it not just to the people, but to all living creatures.

The animal and bird world is included in God's promise. Similarly, the Bible tells us God took great delight in making animals and birds and fish. So what do we conclude from this? It tells us that God is vitally interested in and cares about all of the creation that He has made – the birds, the animals, the world of nature – the environment. Yes, He has a special relationship with people. But He also loves the rest of His creation.

Do animals know God? I believe they do in some way. I think animals and birds worship God in their own way. When I wake to the magpie's early chortling outside my window I find it hard not to believe the birds are worshipping God.

I don't know if animals have souls or not, but it seems there may at least be something spiritual about animals. After all, why can't God work through all of his creation?

The nineteenth century naturalist, John Muir, was exploring Alaska with a party of American Indians. A member of the group owned a short, black and white dog. One evening, Muir went off on his own, climbing over a glacier, and the dog named 'Stickeen' trailed after him. After hours of hiking, they came to a wide crevice. As night was falling, rather than spend hours going around the gaping hole, Muir cut steps into the sheer side of the glacier wall and descended to a slender ice bridge, leading the dog step-by-step. A slip would have sent both to their deaths.

At one point, the ice bridge was only four inches across. When they finally had crossed the bridge and climbed back to the top of the glacier, Muir reported that the dog, gave out "a gush of canine hallelujahs!" Delivered from peril, Stickeen, the dog, literally howled with glee. Muir reported, "... he shrieked and yelled as if saying, 'Saved! Saved! Saved!' "

This is more than the behaviour of instinct!

Days later, when Muir would be leaving the others in the group, he sat with the brave little dog on a wharf, saying farewell. As Stickeen was taken by his Indian owner into the canoe, the dog cried and struggled, and leaned over the edge of the canoe until it disappeared from sight.

Such stories touch us deeply. I often think about the friendship and place of animals in our lives. They point us to a God who created animals and birds along with us to be his companions, and to worship God and to reflect His glory. Sometimes I think God just created animals because it was so much fun!!!

The Bible tells us that when God made His promise to never again destroy the earth through a flood he included not just people but every living thing on earth. God cares about the whole of creation. God expects us to be good stewards of creation. God commanded the first people to look after the planet! God made people caretakers of his beautiful world. Sadly, we have often been very poor caretakers of God's creation. In reality it's our responsibility to look after those who cannot look after themselves - both human and other creatures.

Tragically, creation also shares in our pain and the results of our poor choices and our sin. Animals suffer and die because we suffer and die. The sin of the human race has affected the rest of creation. My beloved dog will die one day not because she is sinful, but because I am sinful. However, there is good news for the human race. Salvation and new life come to us through another man, Jesus. And in Jesus we put our hope and trust. But does this mean that there is new life promised to the animal world too? In other words, will my dog go to heaven when she dies one day? I don't know. But given that the animal world is so important to us and to God in this life, I suspect there is something

similar in the life after this one. I hope, I believe, that Heaven will include a world of nature and animals and birds and other living creatures.

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