
Do Pets Go to Heaven?

Sooner or later, any discussion of pet loss comes around to this question. You may have asked it yourself—or, perhaps, you may have wondered how to answer when your child asks it of you. Lengthy articles have been written on both sides of the argument. An ABC News poll showed that 47% of pet owners believed the answer was yes (35% said “no”).

Christians tend to find this question particularly difficult, because we prefer to base “answers” to any spiritual question on the authority of the Bible. (I say “we” because, yes, I am a Christian, and yes, I have wrestled with this question.) Consequently, most discussions of this question turn into scripture-slinging contests, addressing the issue of whether animals have “souls,” can be “redeemed,” etc. The problem is, scripture does not offer a definitive answer to this issue.

There is a reason for this; it’s not simply God’s perverse decision to leave thousands of pet owners in the dark. The reason is that the Bible is about human redemption; it’s an instruction manual about the choices humans must make. If pets go to heaven, however, it isn’t due to anything you or I do to “get” them there—so perhaps it is no surprise that the Bible contains no “instructions” on the matter.

Silence does not mean a negative answer, however. The Bible is silent on a great many things, leaving us with a number of questions that we must explore and resolve using the hearts and minds that God gave us—seeking an answer that is rooted, not in theology and doctrine, but in logic and love.

What I hope to offer here, therefore, is not a “hard answer” to the question, but a framework within which one can choose one’s own answer (or from which one can better answer the question when asked by another).

Can Animals Be Saved?

The Christian concept of heaven is inextricably linked with the concepts of salvation, redemption, and resurrection. Christians don’t believe that “going to heaven” happens automatically; it’s the result of conscious decisions made during one’s life. While the Bible is very specific about the requirements for human salvation, it says nothing about salvation for animals. This has led many to assume that, since animals cannot be “saved,” they cannot possibly go to heaven.

Another way to look at this question, however, is to recall why the Bible states that redemption is “necessary” for humans. It is because, in scriptural terms, humans are “fallen” beings. Humans have free will, and thus the ability to choose between good and evil. Humans can choose salvation (and heaven), or choose to reject both.

Animals, however, have never “fallen”—and if one has not fallen, it is not at all clear that the intermediary step of “redemption” is necessary. Animals cannot “choose” between good and evil; when animals behave badly in our homes, it is generally because of a conflict between their God-given natures and our human requirements. Animals have no need to be saved because they are not considered “sinners.”

This doesn’t mean that we can necessarily assume that because animals have no “sin,” they are automatically received into heaven. What it does mean is that the whole issue of “redemption” simply doesn’t apply. Whether animals go to heaven or not, the question of “redemption” is not the basis for letting them in—or keeping them out.

What Does Heaven Look Like?

Another common argument against the notion that pets go to heaven is that “animals don’t have souls.” Often, a proponent of this view will not hesitate to say that there are no animals in heaven, for this reason. Again, the Bible isn’t exactly clear on that, so the question is not answerable on a strictly scriptural basis.



Rather than attempt to address this directly, therefore, I’d like to raise another question: What do you believe heaven is like? If you ask this question of most people, you’re likely to get a description of a glorious garden, filled with beautiful trees and radiant flowers, with sparkling waters and soft breezes. Very few people imagine heaven as some sort of giant, sterile concrete parking lot, devoid of life. We base our image of heaven on the beauties of the creation that is Earth.

Does your garden have birds singing in those heavenly trees? Do butterflies flit among the divine flowers? Just as I can’t imagine a heaven without plants, neither can I imagine one without animals. (At this point, the “pro-heaven” folks will usually point out that we know, based on scripture, that there are, at the very least, several horses of various colors in heaven!) Whether animals have souls, I am convinced that there are animals in heaven. And if it is remotely possible to encounter heavenly dogs and heavenly cats amongst those heavenly flowers and trees, then perhaps it’s not such a huge stretch to suppose that one of those might be your heavenly dog, or my heavenly cat.

Lessons in Love

My own personal view on this question is that, just as humans are redeemed through the love of God, pets may possibly be “redeemed” through our love. 1 Cor. 7:12-14 speaks of the sanctification of a household through an individual; while it may be stretching a point to suppose that this household might include pets, it’s not a completely illogical stretch.

More to the point, I believe that God uses pets to help humans learn about love. From pets, we learn mercy, compassion, patience, and understanding—and we also learn what it means to receive unconditional love. If pets are a means by which we are taught about love, must we assume that once we have learned the lesson, we must then be forced to lose that love forever? Shall we assume that God, the author of love, has so little compassion for us that He first gives us pets to love, and then tells us, “Yes, well, I know that you really loved that little dog or precious cat I sent your way, but rules are rules”?

This is also a handy way to address the question of whether all animals—including that mole who’s currently digging up your garden—go to heaven. If there is any sort of “selection process,” I believe that process is based on love. My love sanctifies my household; your love sanctifies yours. It doesn’t necessarily sanctify the house next door.

This, of course, also raises the sticky counter-question: Does that mean that only those pets who have been fortunate enough to have been loved go to heaven? What about pets who suffered abuse and neglect during their lifetime? Are they “doomed” to some other, far less pleasant afterlife? There may be no good answer to this question either, except one certainty: Whether or not pets go to heaven, we can be quite certain that they do not go to Hell. Hell is reserved specifically for those who have made the wrong choice—it is not a catch-all for those with no other destination.

Do Pets Care?

While I may wonder about whether I'll be reunited with my pets in heaven, I am certain of one thing: My pets aren't wondering the same thing. (Theology is only of interest to those who wonder about choices.) Animals live in the now, not in the next week; they deal with what is, not what might be or could be or should be. Pets do not ask "what comes next?" This is a human question, based on human grief.

I firmly believe that God takes care of all His creation. I don't know what plan He has for the animals of this world. So when I ask whether I'm going to meet my cats again, I'm asking for my sake, out of my grief—not because I feel I have to worry that God will forget to look after my cat if I don't to remind Him. I ask, because I want to know if my loss is eternal or temporary, not because I need fear that my pet faces some terrible doom if the answer isn't what I want to hear.

Would It Be Heaven Without Fido?

Would heaven be a wonderful place—would it truly be "paradise"—if our pets weren't there? For many, the answer is "no"—and obviously, God knows this! Placing restrictions on what can or can't be in heaven is a fruitless exercise, much like debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin; no one has brought back a report, and sooner or later we're all going to find out anyway. In the interim, we are free to imagine whatever we choose.

However, there are many who feel that it is important to be "right" about everything, especially everything spiritual—that there is no room for spiritual "error." These are the folks, I suspect, who argue most loudly and angrily against the concept of pets in heaven. And there are certainly many issues on which, for a Christian, there is no "wiggle room" for debate. Where the answer matters, the answer is given. If the answer is not given, then it is quite possible that the answer doesn't really matter—i.e., there is no penalty for being "wrong."

If you believe that pets go to heaven, and this turns out to be incorrect, there's no penalty. Such a belief will not doom anyone to Hell. It is not a salvation issue. Nor are you at risk of leading someone else "astray" if you allow them to hold such a belief. If, for example, you are concerned about allowing a child to believe something you think is an "error," ask yourself whether harboring such a belief is more damaging to that child's faith than, say, believing that God does not share or respect that child's love for her pet, or care about her grief.

"But what if she's disappointed?" you might ask. What if, indeed, we choose to believe that our pets are in heaven—and then, when we get there, we find out that we're wrong? While this may be painful to imagine, it's equally hard to imagine being disappointed in any way, shape or form when we do get to heaven—whether we find our pets there or not. As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 13:12: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then I shall know [fully] even as also I am known." What we do not know now, we will know then; what we do not understand now, we will understand then. And we will not be disappointed.



Making a Choice

So what's the bottom line here? Do they or don't they? Every argument that I've offered in favor of pets going to heaven could be used to argue the opposite view. The key is not to seek a "definitive answer," because there is none. The key is this: On this particular issue, where the Bible is silent, you have the right to choose the answer that feels true to you—that comforts and consoles you. You do not need to accept someone else's view. When God is silent about an issue, that issue is left to each of us to decide, in our own hearts and with our own minds. Don't let someone else add to your grief by trying to make up your mind for you!

More Information:

For a good theological discussion of this question and a review of some of the scriptures often used on both sides, see "Do Pets Go to Heaven?" on the Clarifying Christianity website, at <http://www.clarifyingchristianity.com/pets.shtml>.

Another interesting discussion of the question can be found in a downloadable PDF file, "[Will Mr. Pooper Go to Heaven?](#)" Good scripture references.

A book titled *Do Animals Go to Heaven?* is available at <http://www.eternalanimals.com>; the website offers excerpts, articles and scripture references.

You can read another online book, *All Creatures Do Go to Heaven... Especially Pets*, online in its entirety at <http://www.all-creatures.org/ach>. The presentation on this site can be a bit off-putting—lots of bold, different size fonts, etc.—but I found the verses and translation details very interesting and worth exploring.



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If you're grieving the loss of a pet, you'll find more helpful tips in Moira Allen's book, *Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*, available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1598584537/>

Do Pets Go to Heaven?

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