

# Do All Dogs Go to

**F**or many people, their most trusted and loved friends have four legs and a tail. In a “Pet Love Poll” done by America Online in September 1999, more than 20,000 people were asked: What level of importance does your pet hold relative to other family members? Do they hold more, equal or less value? Almost 15 percent of those surveyed said



by Dan Schaeffer

# Heaven?

their pets hold more value than family members, and fully 51 percent said their pets hold equal value. Only 28 percent said their pets have less value than their family members.<sup>1</sup> It seems that these statistics may hold true for Christians as well as non-Christians.

Author and artist Joni Eareckson Tada found out just how strongly many Christians feel about their animals when she suggested in her book,

*“A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, But the compassion of the wicked is cruel.”*  
(Proverbs 12:10, NASB)

*Heaven... Your Real Home*, that pets would not be resurrected from the dead. She received more critical letters over one paragraph than all her other writings combined. One

person after another questioned how she could possibly say that their pets would not be in heaven.

After rethinking her position, she decided, “If God brings our pets back to life, it wouldn’t surprise me. It would be just like him. It would be totally in keeping with his generous character.” She went on to say, “Heaven is going to be a place that will refract and reflect in as many ways as possible the goodness and joy of our great God, who delights in lavishing love on his children. So will pets be in heaven? Who knows?!”<sup>2</sup>

## Barking Up the Wrong Tree?

In his book, *Resurrection*, author and Bible expert Hank Hanegraaff detailed Joni’s dilemma, and then commented, “Is Joni barking up the wrong tree, or is she right? As usual, I’d say she’s right on. While we cannot say for certain that the pets we enjoy today will be ‘resurrected’ in eternity, I, like Joni, am not willing to preclude the possibility. In the final analysis, one thing is certain, scriptures provide us with a sufficient precedent for suggesting that animals will continue to exist after the return of our Lord. Isaiah provides a particularly stirring image in Isaiah 11:6-9.”<sup>3</sup>

Hanegraaff points out that some of the keenest Christian minds, such as C.S. Lewis, have believed that not only animals in general, but pets in particular, will be restored in the resurrection. As Lewis says, pets “may have an immortality, not in themselves, but in the immortality of their masters.”<sup>4</sup> “Very few

animals indeed, in their wild state, attain to a ‘self’ or ego. But if any do, and if it is agreeable to the goodness of God that they should live again, their immortality would also be related to man—not this time to individual masters, but to humanity.”<sup>5</sup>

While most Christians seem to enjoy animals in general, not all are quite ready to assign our pets places in heaven.

## Do Animals Have Souls?

As Dr. Robert Saucy, Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Talbot School of Theology, says, “My understanding is that animals are souls, rather than *having* souls. Scripture calls them ‘living creatures’ which in the original is literally ‘living souls,’ exactly the same as with humans in Genesis 2:7. Animals are described as having ‘the breath of...life’” (Genesis 7:22, also Ecclesiastes 3:21).

While Saucy tends to think that there will be animals in heaven, he doubts they will be the same individual animals we know and enjoy today.

While animals have a spirit or life force, he explains, it is not of the same quality as that of a human being, the difference being the origin of their life in creation. In the case of animals, God simply calls them forth from creation (Genesis 1:24). It seems to Saucy that God infuses the life power in creation into individual creatures (Genesis 1:20). When the animal dies, and the “spirit” leaves the

body, it goes back where it came from, creation in general. Thus, the particular animal does not exist any more, whereas in humans our spirit comes from God in heaven, and will return to him.

*“Animals are such agreeable friends—they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.”*  
—George Eliot

Gary Richmond disagrees...sort of. Richmond’s background has given him ample time to consider



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IMAGE BY MARY WEGNER—PTM

this issue thoroughly. Presently pastoring singles in Fullerton, California, he was a former veterinary assistant at the Los Angeles Zoo. He is the author of a number of books about animals, including the best seller, *A View From the Zoo*, and his latest, *It's a Jungle Out There!*"

While agreeing with Saucy on many points, he believes strongly that pets will be in heaven.

Richmond appeals to the story of Noah's ark to show the redemptive process of both man *and* animals being saved from a judgment.

He says, "We like the idea that all the animals were saved, but try very hard to

divide ourselves from the animal kingdom. What a person can say with absolute authority is that

*"[Pets] may have an immortality, not in themselves, but in the immortality of their masters."*

—C.S. Lewis

there is no indication in the scripture whatsoever that animals *won't* go to heaven. The Noah's ark story is a strong indication of the redemption of the animal life."

What About Hell?

Yet even Richmond's stand produces nagging questions. "Does that mean every flea or every ant goes to heaven?" He admits, "I don't

have a good answer for that." But he doesn't believe animals can go to hell. "They are not moral beings, and hell is reserved for those who are disobedient to him, and the Bible teaches that animals honor him." He feels that animals are attracted to the things of God instinctively and do not have the capacity to sin. "They may wet the rug, but that's not sinful!"

The Reverend Brian T. McSweeney, vice chancellor of the Catholic Archdiocese of New York, contends that by virtue of their relationship with humans, dogs may find themselves in heaven. Though he be-

lieves that heaven was designed for humans, the reason dogs or pets may be there is for us, not for themselves. "I would think a loving God wants us to be happy and allows us to have animals that shared love with us."<sup>6</sup>

The author of *Will I See Fido in Heaven?*, Mary Budemeyer-Porter, disagrees with McSweeney that if dogs go to heaven it is for humans. "I know of no scripture in the Bible that would support that statement." In addition, as to the question of whether dogs make choices that allow them to go to heaven, she replies, "It doesn't make any difference what dogs do because they are innocent of any sin. If they commit a sin, they don't know it."

Stephen H. Webb, Ph.D., associate professor of religion and philosophy at Wabash College, and the author of *On God and Dogs*, disagrees. "Dogs do make moral choices. Some dogs act in evil ways, but I think all dogs will be redeemed, as [I think] all humans will be redeemed, in heaven."<sup>7</sup> Most Christians will have difficulty finding much common ground with Webb's universal salvation and, on that basis, applying it to animals as well.

*When asked if he thought animals could go to hell, he replied, "Based on my dog's behavior—yes!"*

Pets We Love...And Hate

While the theological heavyweights may have thought out their positions a little more than the rest of us, their positions don't differ all that much from those who haven't.

After researching what a number of Christian "experts" might say on the subject, it was important to hear what Christian "non-experts" said to the same questions: Do animals have souls, do our pets go to



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heaven, and on what do you base your belief? It was important that we not only queried pet lovers, but those who didn't have as deep a love affair with their pets as others.

Having just lost their dog, Star, to cancer recently, Norm and Karen Rech had strong feelings. While they do not believe that animals have souls, they do believe there is a place in heaven for them. "They are still his creations, and we can't see him leaving them

*"If my dog is in MY heaven, I will question exactly where I am. My dog will not go to heaven because there are no trash cans to dig in."*

out [of heaven]. Throughout the Bible God uses animals to communicate with people, such as the dove and the donkey. Isn't that another indication that animals have a special place in God's

heart and, therefore, a place in heaven?"

While Norm and Karen admit that their belief may just be based on wishful thinking, they nevertheless conclude, "We love animals and know God does, too, or he wouldn't have created them for us to use for our needs, but also to enjoy as companions."

Popular Christian author and speaker, Sigmund Brouwer, articulated the obvious. "I would really have a tough time committing either way, but I would want to believe it [that animals went to heaven]." Brouwer shares a personal story that reinforces the difficulty this issue raises. His wife's nieces had two little kittens, which were killed by dogs. The girls, ages seven and nine, were understandably upset, so

Brouwer's wife Cindy, and her sister, had a funeral for the kittens and prayed over them. The mother assured the girls that the little kitties were indeed going to heaven. At that point the youngest said, "Good, and I hope those dogs are going to hell!"

### Fido Should Be Left Behind

Not all pet owners feel a deep empathy and compassion for all their pets. As chiropractor Dr. Dave Johnson said, in answer to the question of whether he thought animals would go to heaven, "Based on my dog's behavior—no!" When asked if he thought animals could go to hell, he replied, "Based on my dog's behavior—yes!" Admitting he didn't have any really strong opinions and was open to more information, he nevertheless stressed, "It would be nice if my dog would accelerate his search for heaven."

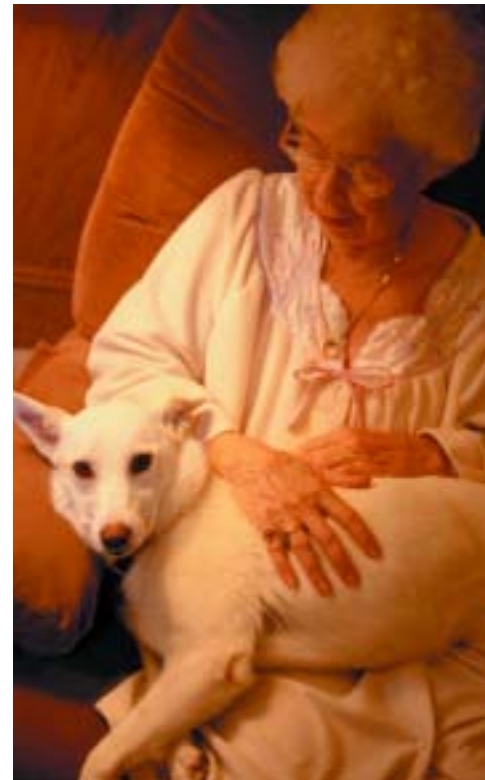
Cecelia Harvey, an R.N., admitting that she is occasionally at odds with her family's chocolate Labrador retriever, put it succinctly, "Animals *do not* have souls. Take my dog, a large animal with a pea-size brain. He has no regret when he does something wrong, like dig in the trash. He also has no repentant heart when he is let back into the house and goes right back to the trash!" As to her dog being in heaven, she replied, "If my dog is in MY heaven, I will question exactly where I am." Then she added, "My dog will not go to heaven because there are no trash cans to dig in and no cat food to eat."

However, the only animals she consigned to hell were cats, "especially old ones who meow constantly, act like they've never been fed and shed!" When

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## God's Love for Animals

The Bible does not answer this question dogmatically, however, it is interesting that the early church did not hold the view that animals did not have souls. It wasn't until the enlightenment, with thinkers like Descartes and Hobbes, that the existence of animal souls began to be challenged.

While it is true that there is indeed a vast gulf between the animal kingdom and humans, it does not naturally follow that animals have no souls. However, if animals do have souls, it also does not naturally follow that their souls exist independently from their bodies, like human souls, and that they can survive their death.

But to the question of whether there will be animals in heaven, it can be pointed out that the Garden of Eden was populated with animals. Certainly they were an important part of God's creation. And in the millennial kingdom, which many feel is a literal depiction of the millennial reign of Christ on the earth after his second coming, the animal kingdom plays a prominent part. In fact, in this millennial

kingdom, the animals are no longer antagonistic towards each other, but predator and prey are co-existing peacefully, and children play with animals once considered lethal (Isaiah 11:6-9). It seems to be a return to the conditions in the original Garden of Eden.

will be horses and other animals in heaven.

Perhaps, since it is impossible to be dogmatic given the scriptures' silence (Deuteronomy 29:29), it would help us to retreat to what we do know. We can't be sure whether our pets go to heaven or not, but we can be sure

that God loves them very much and will be loving towards them, because they are part of his creation. His compassion does not begin and end with man, but extends "toward all he has made" (Psalm 145:13).

"A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel" (Proverbs 12:10).

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are

you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26).

"I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine" (Psalm 50:11).

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (Matthew 10:29).

—Editors



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The Peaceable Kingdom  
Edward Hicks (1780-1849)

While there is disagreement as to whether this kingdom is to be taken literally, the fact that animals are listed with people in the description of this kingdom seems to indicate that animals continue to play an important role in God's kingdom. Furthermore, language used in the book of Revelation (if taken literally) seems to indicate that there



In *Pets' Letters to God*, Mark Bricklin, editor of *Pets: Part of the Family* magazine, takes a tongue-in-cheek look at how pets might communicate with God. In the introduction he notes that since dogs can not only learn the meanings of 30 or 40 words but master hand signals and body language, "who are we to think that animals cannot or do not communicate with God?"

Here are a few examples of what he imagines as canine prayers from his book, published by Hallmark Books.

Dear God,  
Could you explain why dogs are not allowed on a Greyhound Bus?  
—Tyler

Dear God,  
When we get to Heaven, can we sit on your couch? Or is it the same old story?  
—Laddie Boy

Dear God,  
Are there mailmen in Heaven? If there are, will I have to apologize?  
—Pete, the Pit Bull

Dear God,  
When we get to the Pearly Gates, do we have to shake hands to get in?  
—Porsche

*“Scriptures provide us with a sufficient precedent for suggesting that animals will continue to exist after the return of our Lord. Isaiah provides a particularly stirring image in Isaiah 11:6-9.”*

*—Hank Hanegraaff*

asked how strongly she held her view, she replied, “My dog rolls in the dirt after a bath, does that tell you something?”

Harvey makes a good point. Eternity with an animal that annoyed you in this life might resemble eternal torment rather than eternal bliss.

### Tough Questions

Val Montefu, a realtor and a Royal Poodle owner, raised additional thorny questions. How would a pet’s eternal destination be determined? By the faith (or lack of faith) of its owner? By whether or not it is an obedient animal? (All cats would perish.) And since scripture teaches there is no marriage or giving in marriage in heaven, does that mean all earthly relationships are severed in heaven? If that is true, whose dog would he be? Would he be an independent creature

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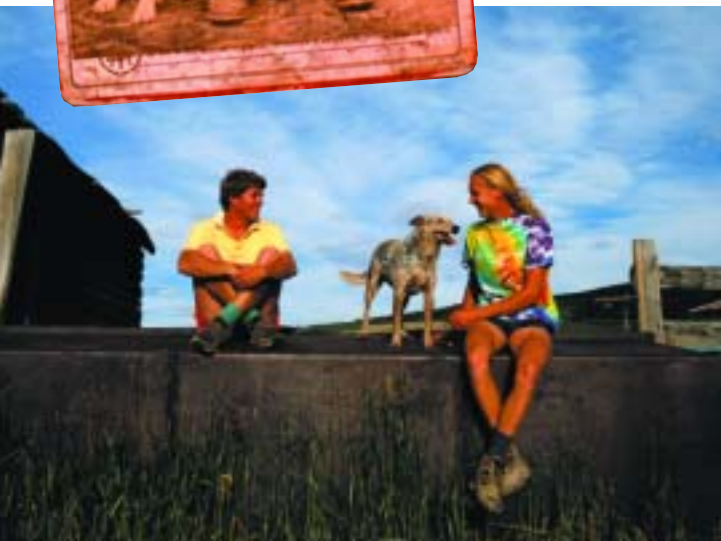
with no owner, feeding himself and walking himself? Hmmm.

It seems, ultimately, what a person believes is strongly influenced by the nature of their relationship to pets or the animal world. The stronger their “emotional resonance” with an animal, as Sigmund Brouwer puts it, the more likely they are to want to see their pets in heaven, and vice-versa. It appears that at times we are eager to find in scripture the answer we are looking for, and whether you believe pets will be in heaven or not, scripture provides hope, for it neither affirms nor denies the possibility.

The one thing that everyone who was interviewed expressed was a reticence to be too dogmatic. It seems clear that the Bible isn’t crystal clear on the issue, and emotions run high. So let’s all take a deep breath, and...take our dog for a walk! □



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<sup>1</sup> AOL Pet Lover Poll, 9/21/99. AOL Polling from Digital City Technologies, Total votes: 20,390

<sup>2</sup> Joni Eareckson Tada, *Holiness in Hidden Places* (Nashville: J. Countryman, 1999), 133.

<sup>3</sup> Hank Hanegraaff, *Resurrection* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 120-121.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 139-40.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Reitman, “Do Dogs Go To Heaven,” *Dog Fancy Magazine*, September 1999, 26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

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## Dogs in a Cemetery Prompt Dispute

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by G. Jeffrey MacDonald

Portland, Maine—As the winter's rusty hue says another short winter day is almost gone, dozens of Portlanders gather in a burial ground to perform a daily ritual. To some, the ritual is sacred. To others, it's downright obscene and should be outlawed.

The ritual is leashless dog walking—a regular social event for dogs and humans alike in urban parks across the country. Here, however, the setting is a historic graveyard where some visitors have been appalled to see as many as 250 dogs each day urinating on headstones and defecating on graves.

Having heard the cries of outraged Irish Catholics whose ancestors rest where dogs romp, an advisory panel urged the Portland City Council in December to ban dogs from the premises.

Now Portland dog owners find themselves with an unusual burden, one their counterparts in crowded cities may face if their quests for more dog parks lead them into inactive cemeteries. In Portland, they're trying to justify dog-running as a way of honoring hallowed ground.

"It's a competition for what's considered sacred," said the Rev. Martha Englert, an Episcopal priest who runs her dog, Bob, at Western Cemetery every day. "There are conversations that happen here that are very sacred, like one I had with a woman who has melanoma. 'When I'm dead, I would love to have dogs tap-dancing on my grave.'"

Maybe so, but you'd better keep them away from our ancestors. That's the message from the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Irish group that erected a headstone last year to mark "The Catholic Ground" where many

who fled the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s are buried.

"I think it's pretty obvious why we put a fence around it," said Paul O'Neil, president of the Hibernians' local chapter. "This is desecration. It doesn't matter if you pick up after your dog. The damage is already done."

Finding space for dogs to run leashless in congested cities is a growing national problem, according to Victor Walker, a Boston consultant who has urged Portland to restrict dogs in the cemetery. Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for example, recently designated a special dog park to accommodate the need.

Some cities, however, lack either the space or the money to set up fenced-in parks where dogs can run, and that makes unused cemeteries a temptation to dog owners.

Portland has tolerated dogs in Western Cemetery since the early 1980s and made the policy official by an act of the City Council in 1993. Before the dogs arrived, the neglected 122-acre plot was notorious for drug deals, vandalism and homosexual encounters between strangers, according to the Rev. Stephen W. Foote, dean of St. Luke's Cathedral in Portland.

In Ireland, as in most of America, laws prohibit dogs from entering a graveyard. Such codes are on the books to protect against disturbance of places where people believe their family members rest eternally.

Foote, who lives beside the cemetery and walks his two dogs there every day, has argued at public hearings and elsewhere that desecration occurs only when the perpetrator intends defilement, and dogs intend no harm.

But that argument passes no muster with Cheryl Ruminski, a 54-year-old South Casco, Maine, mother who helped start the protest movement with a public letter a year ago.

"I resent that people let their dogs do that on my ancestors, even if it's been 150 years since they were buried," Ruminski said, gesturing at dogs nearby at the

cemetery. "People had to pay to be buried here. They didn't think it was going to be used as a doggie bathroom, which is what it is."

Shortly before sundown, men and women ages 20 to 80 file through a cemetery gate, unleash dogs of all sizes and tear plastic scooping bags from a city-sponsored dispenser. Dogs sprint in all directions, cruising past Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's grave among others.

Dog owners say they care for the grounds by soliciting donations through their group, Friends of Western Cemetery, and admonishing those who don't pick up after their dogs. What's more, though they might not speak to strangers anywhere else, they chat openly here about the spiritual bonds they've made in this place.

"This is the only community I have in Portland, except for the ones at the bars I frequent," said 20-something dog owner, Scott Hudson. He strolled the grounds with a friend he'd met there, Jessica Matzkin. She has moved to Connecticut in the meantime but returned for a reunion with dogs and their owners.

"This place brings so much joy to people," Matzkin said. "Graveyards are a place where people are buried so people can come and gather."

At the crux of the controversy is not whether the grounds are sacred, but how the sacred is properly honored.

Walker, the consultant, expects to join the advisory committee in giving the Portland City Council a final recommendation on dogs as part of a \$1.8 million cemetery restoration proposal.

If dogs aren't banned before Memorial Day, the Hibernians intend to step up the fight. They say they'll abide by a new Maine law that requires a flag next to every veteran's gravesite.

"Then it won't be only grave desecration," said O'Neil, the local Hibernian president. "Then it'll be flag desecration, too." □

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