

DO ANIMALS HAVE A SOUL?

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I know the Bible teaches that every human has an immortal soul. But do animals have a soul?

If you ever owned a dog, a cat, or any other kind of animal to which you had grown attached, you may have wondered whether or not that animal had a soul. Men and women through the ages have pondered the same question. Animals—whose vast numbers stretch into the millions—are ubiquitous as our co-inhabitants on planet Earth. They serve as an unpaid, ever-dependable, and quite invaluable work force as they help the farmer plow a rough field or the blind person cross a busy city street. They account for a considerable portion of the total world food supply for humans. They provide joy and companionship for young and old alike. They are an undeniable boon to mental health, especially for sick children and the infirm elderly. Surely none among us would doubt the many benefits that accrue as a result of the presence of animals in our midst.

But do animals possess souls? And if they do, is their soul the same as a human soul? That is to say, is it immortal—will it eventually inhabit either heaven or hell?

The English word “soul” derives from a number of different words in the Old and New Testaments and is used in the Bible in a variety of ways. First, it is employed as a synonym for a living, breathing person. Moses wrote: “All the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls” (Exodus 1:5; cf. Deuteronomy 10:22). In legal matters also, the word soul was used to denote any individual. The Lord told Moses: “Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, ‘If a soul shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things which ought not to be done’” (Leviticus 4:2). When Jacob was speaking of himself in Genesis 49:6, he used the expression, “O my soul”—which meant simply “me.” In each of these instances, actual people—individually or collectively—were under discussion.

Second, the word soul can be used to describe the physical form of life that both men and animals possess and that ceases to exist at death. In their *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Brown, Driver, and Briggs noted that the word “soul” (Hebrew *nephesh*) often is employed to mean “life principle” (1907, p. 659). In Genesis 1:20,24,30, God spoke of the *nephesh hayyah*—literally “soul breathers” or “life breathers” (often translated as “living creatures” or “life”—cf. Leviticus 11:10). The writer of Proverbs observed in regard to animals: “A righteous man regardeth the life (*nephesh*) of his beast; but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (12:10). Hebrew scholar Hugo McCord therefore suggested:

Then the translators realized that the first meaning of *nephesh* is “breath,” and so Genesis 1:20,24,30 and Genesis 2:7 all fit together in understanding Moses as saying that all animals and man too are breathers. Breathers, coupled with *hayyah*, “living,” the translators thought, would be well translated, in the case of animals, as “living creatures,” and in the case of man as a “living being” (1995, 23[1]:87-88).

Third, the word soul can be used to describe something that is immortal and thus never dies. In speaking of Rachel’s death at the birth of her son, Moses wrote: “And it came to pass, as her soul was departing (for she died)” (Genesis 35:18). While Elijah was at the house of a widow in the city of Zarephath, the woman’s son died. But Elijah “cried unto Jehovah, and said.... ‘O Jehovah my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again’” (1 Kings 17: 21). Hezekiah celebrated the fact that the soul survives the death of the body: “But thou hast in love to my soul (*nephesh*) delivered it from the pit of corruption” (Isaiah 38:17).

Centuries later, the Lord Himself warned: “And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28) When the apostle John was allowed to peer into the book “sealed with seven seals” (Revelation 5:1), he “saw underneath the altar the souls of them that had been slain for the word

of God” (Revelation 6:9). Each of these passages is instructive of the fact that there exists within man a soul that survives the death of the body.

The question therefore becomes: Can the word “soul” be used correctly in referring to animals? The first definition obviously cannot apply to animals since animals are not persons. But the second definition most certainly would apply to animals. Compare the following passages. In Psalm 78:50 we find an example of the usage of “soul” as “life” when the writer said in speaking of the people of Egypt (who tried in vain to prevent the Israelites from leaving their country’s slavery) that God “spared not their soul from death, but gave their life over to the pestilence.” In this instance, the word “soul” (Hebrew *nephesh*) is used to denote the physical life of humans. But in Genesis 1:20,24, the identical word is employed to speak of animals as “living creatures” (Hebrew *nephesh hayyah*). In this sense, then, yes, it is correct to say that animals have “souls”—since the word soul means only physical life. In responding to the question, “Do animals have souls?” McCord wrote: “Yes, when the word soul, *nephesh*, only means ‘breath,’ as in Genesis 1:20 (ASV), ‘Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures,’ *nephesh hayyah*, literally, ‘living soul’” (1999).

But can the third definition be applied to animals. Do animals possess immortal souls that one day will inhabit heaven or hell? In this era of evolutionary fervor and an increasing fascination with all kinds of “rights,” we are reminded constantly that man shares a “kinship” with members of the animal kingdom that positively must not be overlooked. Michael Fox wrote:

There is indeed a kinship in the present diversity and evolutionary continuity of all life.... It is more important today than ever before for human beings to be aware of their kinship with all life. It is essential for our survival that we have a strong reverence for all forms of life as our kin... (1978, p. 121).

Those who do not believe in God or accept the Bible as His Word (and thus deny the existence of an immortal soul) generally perceive animals as man’s equal in almost every aspect. Thus, they often refer to animals as being not one whit behind humans in regard to how they should be viewed or treated. For example, in his book, *The Case for Animal Rights*, Tom Regan acknowledged that each human is “the experiencing subject of a life, a conscious creature having an individual welfare” (1987, p. 59). But he likewise viewed animals as “the experiencing subjects of a life, with inherent value of their own” (p. 59) and so he asked:

What could be the basis of our having more inherent value than animals? Their lack of reason, or autonomy, or intellect? Only if we are willing to make the same judgement in the case of humans who are similarly deficient. But it is not true that such humans—the retarded child, for example, or the mentally deranged—have less inherent value than you or I. Neither, then, can we rationally sustain the view that animals, like them, in being the experiencing subjects of a life have less inherent value. All who have inherent value have it equally, whether they be human animals or not. Inherent value, then, belongs equally to those who are the experiencing subjects of a life (p. 60).

This type of thinking—that men and animals both possess “inherent value equally”—has set the stage for those who profess a belief in God to set forth their claim that animals do indeed possess immortal souls. In his book, *All Creatures Here Below*, Frank Hoffman stated:

...if the animal sacrifice is the precursor, or type of the final sacrifice of our Lord and Savior, which is a mainstream Christian teaching, **is God’s Word not also telling us that animals do have souls?**... Now then, why are we reluctant to accept the fact that animals do have souls? Because we are still trying to hold on to some of our pride, and perhaps our greed. If we do not accept the fact that animals have souls, then we may have a self-acceptable excuse for the way we treat the rest of God’s creatures, which is not in accordance with God’s desire, but ours (1998, emp. added).

The position advocated by such writers is completely at odds with the instruction found in God's Word. First, man and animals **do not** share kinship—the claims of evolutionists (and those sympathetic to them) notwithstanding. The apostle Paul addressed this point in 1 Corinthians 15 when he wrote: “**All flesh is not the same flesh**: but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fishes” (v. 39, emp. added). As Stuart Walker correctly commented: “Genesis 1:26-30 and 2:7,21-25 clearly states that man was a special creation with no phylogenetic relationship to any other creature. Thus, there is a phylogenetic **discontinuity** between man and animals—we are not physically interrelated” (1991, 5[2]:21, emp. added). As Adam previewed the animals in the Garden of Eden for a mate and went about naming them (Genesis 2:18-20), this “discontinuity” became clear. Among all the animals that God had created, there was none that corresponded to him. Not one sufficed to remove him from his personal isolation of being “alone” (Genesis 2:18). As Walker went on to note:

Thus, we share in the life principle, but it is not the life principle itself that is precious.... Ontological continuity cannot be established upon the experiences of life, the intrinsic value of life itself, or physical parallels between animals and humans; rather, **we are separated from the animal world by an impassable gulf—a chasm of essential difference in who we are** (5[2]:22, emp. added).

Second, man was commanded to “subdue and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). The Hebrew word for “subdue” (*kabash*) is described in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* as meaning “to tread down,” “to bring under subjection,” etc. The same word is used in Numbers 32:22,29 and Joshua 18:1, where it is used to describe the subduing and pacifying of Israel's enemies. To *kabash*, therefore, is to

face that which opposes us and is inimical in its present state to our goals and well-being, and bring it into conformity with our needs—completely pacifying it.... Thus it can be inferred that when God gave Adam dominion over the creative order, He was describing a pre-emptive authority which man would wield over the creation as he interpreted the cosmos and manipulated its functions to man's benefit... (Walker, 5[2]:25).

Man's “pre-emptive authority” over the creation, including the animal kingdom, was demonstrated quite forcefully in a single stroke when God granted mankind permission to kill and eat animals for food (Genesis 9:3-4). However, within the same context God specifically forbade manslaughter “for in the image of God made he man” (Genesis 9:5-6). If man “shares kinship” with animals or if animals possess immortal souls, why would God permit him to kill his own kin—relatives whose souls are no different than his own? As Neale Pryor commented: “Animals also have a *ruach* [a Hebrew word for “breath” or “life”—BT/SE] (Genesis 6:17). Killing one who has a *ruach* or *nephesh* would not necessarily constitute murder; otherwise animals could not be sacrificed or slaughtered” (1974, 5[3]:34). God's prohibition against murder carried over even into New Testament times (Matthew 19:18). At the same time, however, God broadened the list of animals that men could kill and eat (Acts 10:9-14). Why was it that men **could not** kill other men, but **could** kill animals? The answer, of course, is that animals were not created “in the image of God.”

Third, although it is true that at times the Bible uses the same terms to refer to the life principle/force in both humans and animals (e.g. Genesis 7:22), and although it is true that those terms may be used to refer to the immortal soul of humans (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Matthew 10:28), they **never** are employed by Bible writers to refer to an immortal soul in animals. In their *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Keil and Delitzsch observed:

The beasts arose at the creative word of God, and **no communication of the spirit is mentioned** even in ch. ii:19; the origin of their soul was coincident with that of their corporeality, and their life was merely the individualization of the universal life, with which all matter was filled in the beginning by the Spirit of God. On the other hand, the human spirit is not a mere individualization of the divine breath which breathed upon the material of the world, or of the universal spirit of nature; nor is his body merely a production of the earth when stimulated by the creative word of God. The earth does not bring forth his body, but God Himself puts His hand to the work and forms him; nor does the life already imparted to the world by the Spirit of God individualize itself in him, but God breathes it directly into the nostrils of the one man, in the whole fulness of His personality, the breath of life, that in a manner corresponding to the personality of God **he may become a living soul** (1982, 1:79-80, emp. added).

Man alone was created “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26-27). Walker asked: “If the putative parallels either do not exist or are insignificant before God, what then is the critical essence of man that distinguishes him from all of creation, and what are the ramifications of this distinction? The key

is found in Genesis 1:26-28, 2:18-25, and 9:5-7; it is that **only man is created in the image of God**” (1991, 5[2]:22, emp. added). Anderson added:

Man's concepts of spiritual values, his recognition of morals and his universal acknowledgement that he is responsible for his own behavior set him far apart from the animal world. That is to say, they have no immortal soul, as the following point documents. The spirit of man returns to God who gave it when one dies (Eccl. 12:7). Such is not said of the animal! Adam is called the son of God in Luke 3:38, obviously by creation. **What animal is called the son of God or offspring of God?** (1989, p. 76, emp. added).

Nowhere does God's Word indicate that animals were created in God's image. As Philip Hughes commented:

Only of man is it said that God created him in his image. It is in this charter of his constitution that man's uniqueness is specifically affirmed as a creature radically distinguished from all other creatures. In this respect a line is defined which links man directly and responsibly to God in a way that is unknown to any other creature. Nothing is more basic than the recognition that being constituted in the image of God is of the very essence of and absolutely central to the humanness of man. It is the key that unlocks the meaning of his authentic humanity (1989, p. 30, emp. added).

Animals may be said to have souls—if the word “soul” is used as the Bible employs it in discussing members of the animal kingdom (i.e., to describe only the physical life force found within all living creatures). But if the word “soul” is used to refer to an **immortal** soul that one day will inhabit heaven or hell, then no, animals may not be said to possess a soul.

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