

In Their Masters

A Christian Account of Where Our Animals Go

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Written after the death of my golden retriever, Roscoe (d. October 25, 2024).

The question

My golden retriever, Roscoe, died on October 25, 2024. I still count the days. He was the closest thing I will ever have to a son, and the question that followed me out of that loss is the oldest one a dog owner asks: where did he go?

I am a believer in Jesus and a scientist at heart, and neither of the usual answers satisfies me. One says animals have no souls and simply stop. The other says all dogs go to heaven and leaves it there. Neither tells me what Scripture teaches, what the Church has thought, or whether the thing between that dog and me was real in any way that matters to God.

This essay argues that it was. I work through what the Bible says about animals, take up C.S. Lewis's proposal that tame animals may be raised in their masters, and face the objections it drew. Then I offer a revised account: every creature returns to the God who breathed life into it, and some creatures are afterward given back to the people who loved them with a love that was itself born of God. This is not a new doctrine. It is an old intuition, held by grieving people for a long time, put in an order that survives the hardest questions.

What Scripture says about animals

Scripture gives animals more than most Christians expect and less than most dog owners want. It never says where an individual animal goes when it dies. It says a great deal about what animals are and what God intends for them.

They have the same breath we do. In Genesis 1:20–24 the animals are *nephesh chayyah*, living souls, the same Hebrew phrase used for Adam in Genesis 2:7. Psalm 104:29–30 says that when God takes away the creatures' breath they die and return to dust, and when he sends his Spirit they are created. Ecclesiastes 12:7 says the spirit returns to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 3:19–21 asks who knows whether the spirit of the beast goes downward; it is a question, not a verdict, and both sides of this debate quote it.

God covenants with them and keeps them. The covenant after the flood is made with every living creature (Genesis 9:9–17). Psalm 36:6 says God preserves man and beast. Jesus says not one sparrow falls apart from the Father (Matthew 10:29). Jonah ends with God's concern for a city's many cattle (Jonah 4:11).

They are part of what gets redeemed. Romans 8:19–23 says the creation itself waits to be set free from decay and groans like a woman in labor. Isaiah 11:6–9 and 65:25 put the wolf with the lamb and the lion with the ox in the restored world. Revelation 5:13 has every creature in heaven, on earth, and under the earth praising God.

And it was good. Before any human existed, God looked at the animals and called them good (Genesis 1:21, 25). Their worth does not begin with us.

What Scripture does not supply is a sorting rule. Nothing in it says a pet goes one place and a cow another, or that an animal's fate depends on its owner. Any account of that has to be argued from the shape of the whole.

Lewis's proposal

The most serious Christian attempt at this question is still chapter 9 of C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* (1940), "Animal Pain."¹ Lewis starts from justice: animals can neither deserve suffering nor be improved by it, so if God is good, something must be done for them. His answer is relational. Humans are understood only in relation to God; animals only in relation to humans, and through humans to God.

From this he draws a striking claim. A tame animal, he says, owes whatever real self it has almost entirely to its master; if a good sheepdog seems almost human, it is because a good shepherd made it so. Then comes the analogy that gives this essay its title: as Christians are raised *in* Christ, so those animals that attain a real self may be raised *in* their masters. The unit of resurrection is not the dog alone but the whole household, which Lewis treats as a single body in something like the Pauline sense. The man will know his dog, and the dog, in knowing its master, will be itself.

Lewis already thinks in degrees. He writes "in so far as" the animal has a self, speaks of "those beasts that attain a real self," and asks how much of the household may be raised. But he never says where the line falls or what becomes of the animals below it. He calls the whole chapter guesswork and means it.

Five years later, in *The Great Divorce*, he shows the idea rather than arguing it.² The heavenly Sarah Smith walks with cats, dogs, birds, and horses following her, and George MacDonald explains that every beast that came near her had its place in her love; in her they became themselves, and now the life she has in Christ flows over into them. Notice the quiet shift. The qualifying relation is no longer dominion but love, and it reaches any creature that came near her.

So Lewis left three things unfinished: what happens to animals that have no master, whether the master must be saved for the animal to be raised, and how to reconcile dominion in 1940 with love in 1945.

The objections

Lewis's idea has been criticized from the day it appeared, and the criticisms are good ones.

1. **The unloved animal.** Evelyn Underhill wrote to Lewis in January 1941 and called the doctrine intolerable, a frightful exaggeration of what human primacy involves.³ Her example was the cow we have turned into a milk machine: is she nearer the mind of God than her wild ancestor? Bethany Sollereeder made the same point for deep time: if creatures are redeemed only through

- relationship with humans, there will be frightfully few dinosaurs.⁴ On a strict reading of Lewis, the dog that was beaten and abandoned is the one least likely to be raised. That is backwards.
2. **God's own love.** If no sparrow falls without the Father, God's relationship with every creature is already the decisive one. Why should a human's love add anything God's lacks? And if God's love is always enough, the human bond does no work at all.
 3. **The unsaved owner.** What of a dog loved faithfully by someone who never comes to faith? Either the dog is lost through no fault of its own, or it sits in heaven waiting for someone who never arrives. God does not make that kind of mistake, and a theory that requires him to is wrong somewhere.
 4. **Dominion.** Lewis's claim that only the tame animal is the natural animal makes human mastery the measure of an animal's worth. The 1945 version, grounded in love, is better, but Lewis never said so.
 5. **The cow.** The hardest case is not the wild animal but the farmed one. A feedlot steer suffers more than almost any dog and has far less of a human bond. John Wesley saw it two centuries ago: in "The General Deliverance" he says the whole brute creation will be restored, and that annihilation is not deliverance.⁵ Any account that returns the cattle to dust while the pets go to heaven has failed the creatures who needed deliverance most.

The modern literature mostly answers these by dropping the human bond. David Clough argues that God redeems every creature individually.⁶ Christopher Southgate proposes that each creature that suffered gets to flourish as what it was.⁷ Trent Dougherty argues that animals are resurrected and raised to personhood.⁸ These are strong positions. What they lose is the thing every grieving owner knows was real: that the dog became who he was through a particular person, and that the person was changed too.

The proposal

The fix is to reverse the order. Lewis put the human first and God behind him. Put God first and the human after, and almost every objection falls away.

First: every creature returns to God. When any animal dies, it goes back to the one who breathed life into it. This is Psalm 104 and Ecclesiastes 12:7 read plainly, and it is what Clough and Wesley affirm. This is not a waiting room; it is the thing the creature was made for. The abused dog is there. The feedlot steer is there. The dinosaur is there. No creature's place with God depends on what any human did or failed to do.

Second: some creatures were loved with a love born of God. First John 4:7 says love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God. When a person raises an animal with patience, kindness, and respect, and the animal learns to return it, the love passing between them was never only the person's. It was God's love moving through a human into a creature, and back. Lewis saw that the dog became a self through the person. What he did not say is that the person was a channel, not a source.

Two things happened in that relationship, and they should be kept apart. Wolves became dogs over thousands of years of living with people, so every dog is born already shaped for human love; that is a gift of the species. Then one particular person raised one particular dog; that is a gift of

the individual bond. Separated, they show that the shelter dog has the capacity even where the bond was denied.

Third: when the person arrives, God gives the animal back. The reunion is a gift, not a gate. The animal was already complete in God. When the one who loved it comes home, God sends the creature to be with that person, because the love between them was his own and he does not waste it. God adds to a joy that was already full.

Fourth: until Revelation. Christian theology distinguishes the intermediate state, the dead with Christ before the end, from the final state, the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21. On this account the intermediate state is the creature with God and then with its person; the final state is the whole creation restored together, the wolf with the lamb and every creature praising. The reunion does not end at the end. It is folded into something larger.

How it answers the objections

Take the five in order. The unloved animal is already with God; the human bond can add to that but never subtract from it. God's own love is not in competition with the human bond, because the human bond is God's love in the form it took in that creature's life. The dog knew God's love in being made; he also knew it as a hand on his head every evening of his life. The second is not less real for having a face. The unsaved owner's dog loses nothing, because the reunion is a gift that may or may not be given, not a condition of the animal's peace. Dominion drops out entirely: love, not mastery, is the relation that counts, which is where *The Great Divorce* had already arrived. And the cow is with God like every creature, so Wesley's "annihilation is not deliverance" holds.

On the waiting animal, Lewis faced the same problem for people in *The Great Divorce*. Sarah Smith's husband refuses heaven, and the question is whether her joy is held hostage to his choice. Lewis's answer is no; heaven cannot be vetoed by hell. The same holds for the dog. It is complete in God. If the person comes, the joy grows. If not, nothing was missing.

What is borrowed, what is new, and what is still open

Most of this is borrowed, and it should be. The relational idea is Lewis's. The claim that every creature is redeemed is Clough's and Wesley's. The intermediate and final states are standard eschatology. The two-way formation of animal and human is in Vicki Hearne's *Adam's Task*, which argues that training is a moral relationship that changes both parties.⁹

Two popular Christian writers have already gone partway down this road. Randy Alcorn, in *Heaven* (2004), argues from Romans 8 that the animals of the New Earth will be continuous with the animals of this one, and suggests that God may restore believers' pets to them there as a gift.¹⁰ Peter Kreeft, in *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven* (1990), follows Lewis in treating the question relationally and extends the hope beyond pets to the wild creatures.¹¹ Kreeft grounds that hope in stewardship: humans were meant to have dominion over the animals, and the plan left unfulfilled here will be completed in heaven as proper "petship." That places him with the Lewis of 1940 rather than the Lewis of 1945. Both affirm the reunion. Alcorn does not say what it rests on; Kreeft rests it on dominion. Neither says what happens to the animals nobody loved, or what the animal's state is before its person arrives.

That is what this essay tries to add, and the claim is narrow. First, the order: God's reception of the creature comes before the human bond rather than behind it, which is the move that lets Lewis's idea survive Underhill. Second, the grounding: 1 John 4 makes the human a channel of God's love rather than a source of the animal's worth, which sets this account apart from both Lewis's "Animal Pain" and Kreeft, who rest the bond on dominion. Third, the distinction between the species gift and the individual gift, which answers the shelter dog without abandoning the pet. Fourth, the intermediate and final states written out for animals, which Alcorn's New Earth and Kreeft's heaven both leave undifferentiated.

Some things stay open. Aquinas held that an animal's soul is the form of its body and perishes with it, so a Thomist would want this restated in terms of resurrection rather than survival; a Christian physicalist would say the same.¹² A dog loved by a whole household is given back to whom? Lewis's answer, that the household is one body, is the right start, and 1 John 4 helps: the love was never only one person's. Wild animals are with God, which is everything; whether any of them are given to anyone, the account does not say. And there is no threshold and no percentage. The bond is as real as the love was, and God is the judge of that. A reviewer may want more precision. I think the imprecision is honest.

This is a proposal, offered in the spirit Lewis offered his: a supposal, held with open hands.

Back to Roscoe

I raised Roscoe with love, kindness, and respect, and he gave all three back. I used to think I taught him that. I now think I passed it on. It came through me and it was not mine, and that is the only reason I can trust what happened to it when he died.

He went home to the one who made him and called him good. He is not waiting at a door. He is not missing anything. And when I get there, I expect God to send him down the road to meet me, not because either of us earned it, but because the love between us was his, and he does not throw his own love away.

That is the whole paper. The rest is footnotes.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), chapter 9, "Animal Pain." The closest scholarly treatment of Lewis's view is Susanne E. Foster, "Lewis on Animal Immortality," *Mythlore* 22, no. 1 (1997); see also Michael J. Gilmour, *Animals in the Writings of C.S. Lewis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), and Thomas W. Martin, "The Evolutionary Biology of Play as a Parameter for Animal Heaven," *Theology and Science* 20, no. 4 (2022). Two lines often quoted on this subject are not reliable: Pope Francis did not say "Paradise is open to all God's creatures" (the *New York Times* corrected its report in December 2014), and Luther's "little golden tail" remark has no known primary source. The Rainbow Bridge poem, written by Edna Clyne-Rekhy in 1959, is popular piety rather than theology, but it already carries the intuition this essay tries to ground: the animals who wait at the bridge are the ones who were "especially close to someone."
2. C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), chapter 12.
3. Evelyn Underhill, letter to C.S. Lewis, 13 January 1941, in *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Charles Williams (London: Longmans, 1943); also in *The Making of a Mystic*, ed. Carol Poston (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010). Lewis's reply, 16 January 1941, is in *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, vol. 2.

4. Bethany Sollereeder, “Do Dinosaurs Go to Heaven?” *BioLogos*, 2016; see also her “When Humans Are Not Unique: Perspectives on Suffering and Redemption,” *Expository Times* 127, no. 6 (2016), and *God, Evolution, and Animal Suffering: Theodicy without a Fall* (London: Routledge, 2019).
5. John Wesley, Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance” (1781).
6. David L. Clough, *On Animals*, vol. 1, *Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).
7. Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), chapter 5.
8. Trent Dougherty, *The Problem of Animal Pain: A Theodicy for All Creatures Great and Small* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
9. Vicki Hearne, *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). See also Katharine Mershon, “The Theology of Dog Training in Vicki Hearne’s *Adam’s Task*,” *Religions* 10, no. 1 (2019).
10. Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), ch. 24, “Will There Be Animals on the New Earth?” and ch. 25, “Will Animals, Including Pets, Live Again?”.
11. Peter Kreeft, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven ... But Never Dreamed of Asking* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), “Fourteen Questions About Heaven,” question 10, “Are there animals in heaven?”.
12. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 75, a. 6; *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.82.

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