

Do animals go to heaven? – Isaiah 11:1-9

I had a big crisis of faith when I was eight years old, pondering the question, *“Do animals go to heaven?”* It just did not seem right or fair or ‘like God’ - the God I loved – that the creatures I also loved (and I knew that God loved) should simply cease to be. It was something I wrestled with – which is what I have found is the most useful approach to crises of faith at any age – because in the wrestling something stronger and sturdier and more life-giving emerges.

So, I clearly remember the time and the place when my eight-year-old-self discovered this passage – the passage from Isaiah we just heard – and



announced to my whole household at the time, *“It’s true. Animals will be in heaven! Here it is in black and white! Wolves and lambs and leopards and goats and calves. Lions and tigers and bears – oh my!”*

Of course, as you grow up – and your faith hopefully grows with you – you don’t stay with eight-year-old answers forever. And over the years what I’ve been told is that it is not true! *“Animals don’t go to heaven because, unlike human beings, animals do not have souls.”*

There are two problems with this statement, as a theological statement, however!

The first is that this idea of the ‘soul’, an immaterial self separate to our material self, doesn’t come from the Bible, but from the Greek philosopher Plato. When the Bible talks about the soul – *nephesh* in Hebrew – it refers to a far more integrated identity; everything that makes us who we are: physically, mentally and emotionally.

And this word *nephesh* is used not only of humans, but also of animals. Not once or twice, but at least 171 times. All creatures have *nepheshs*!

The other problem with this statement is its idea of heaven. Somehow, we’ve got the idea the point of Christianity is us *“going to heaven when we die”*. According to theologian Tom Wright says, *“It’s time we rubbed our eyes and read our texts again!”* The point of Christianity is that through God - in Jesus - heaven came to us. And we are invited, Wright says, *“to join in the heaven-on-earth project - now....”* looking forward to God’s *“new creation, which is a heaven-and-earth combination, a total transformation of everything.”*

This is what our passage from Isaiah describes. Not just that animals are in heaven, but that animals caring for other animals *are* heaven; that humans caring for animals are heaven, that animals caring for humans are heaven and – most amazing of all – that humans caring for humans are heaven –

“who judge rightly for the poor, who decide with equity for the meek of the earth...who do not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain...”

God invites us to be part of this ongoing heaven on earth project now.

So, circling back to the question: *“Will there be animals in God’s new creation, God’s transformed world?”*



“The Bible,” Tom Wright says, “doesn’t have much to say on this, but I think we can carefully respond: ‘Yes.’... If God the creator made a world that included giraffes and whales and grasshoppers, and all the other weird and wonderful creatures, is it likely that the new creation would be boring and flat...? It seems to be far more likely that there will be an abundance of all sorts of creatures being gloriously themselves and sharing in all kinds of relationships with God’s human creatures.

And in the middle of that, perhaps there will be an older woman who will recognise among the plethora of delighted creatures a dog to whom, as a little girl, she once gave love and companionship and who returned that favour. I don’t see why that shouldn’t be so.”

Let us sing of that day of peace and fulfillment, that day we are invited to be part of, when – as Isaiah 11:9 says – *“the earth will be as full of the [loving and life-giving] knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”*