

Will I See My Dog *in* Heaven?



Will I See My  
Dog *in* Heaven?  
God's Saving Love for the Whole  
Family of Creation

Jack Wintz, OFM



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*Will I See My Dog in Heaven?*

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*for my confrere and longtime friend* MURRAY BODO, OFM





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# Introduction

How do we answer children when they ask, “Will I see my dog in heaven?” Such a question can become one of the most important in our lives, striking to the heart of a child’s faith in both life and God. But “Will I see my dog in heaven?” is, as I see it, an urgent concern for adults as well. We adults have an equally deep desire to know if we will see our pets again, and all the other lovely creatures alongside whom

we now inhabit this planet. What will become of them after they die?

A friend of mine, Anne, told me the following story:

Anne lives in Cincinnati, where a few years ago she faced the important questions of death and eternity for an animal companion as she was present at the death of her dearly loved dog, Miss Daisy. Anne had befriended Miss Daisy some ten years earlier when the dog, of mixed Spaniel origin, was barely one year old. With the help of her adult son, Anne rescued Miss Daisy from Cincinnati's inner city.

"I would see Miss Daisy wandering around the neighborhood where I worked at an elementary school," Anne told me. "I came to realize that the dog was obviously a stray and lost—and she was adorable! I took cans of tuna to the area where Miss Daisy hung out, but she was very afraid of people and wouldn't approach the tuna till she was left alone. My rescue attempts went on for many months."

In time, Anne was successful in winning Miss Daisy's confidence and was able to take her to her home on the outskirts of the city.

"Miss Daisy was still very shy," Anne told me, "but she eventually became a loyal and loving member of our family. Realizing that Miss Daisy needed a companion, I went to

the dog pound and came home with a dog named Andy. For ten years or so Miss Daisy and Andy were very happy companions, and both became cherished members of the family. But I became especially attached to Miss Daisy.

“Eventually, Miss Daisy became ill, and we had to make the very difficult decision to have her ‘put down.’ My son and I took Miss Daisy to the veterinarian so he could put her to sleep. We wanted the vet to come out to our car so Miss Daisy would be in familiar surroundings and we could be holding her, but he refused our request. So we had to take Miss Daisy inside. We laid the gravely ill dog on the vet’s table on her special blanket. We petted Miss Daisy gently and spoke softly to her as the vet got everything ready to give her the injection. Miss Daisy lay there quietly for a few seconds, and then, just before the injection took effect, she lifted her head and looked directly into my eyes. I can still see that look. It was as if she knew what was going on and she was saying good-bye.”

Anne recalls how her heart melted, and to this day tears come to her eyes when she remembers that scene.

“I still miss the loving pet who had been my dear friend for so many years. *I know I will see Miss Daisy again!*”

I’m sure that most of us have your own memories of being profoundly grief-stricken at the death of a beloved

pet. These are not childish concerns, but the mature reflections of loving Christians.

Many of us prefer to pose the question “Will I see my dog in heaven?” in broader spiritual or theological terms. There is more involved in this question than simply wondering if we will ever be reunited with a loved animal companion. For instance, does God’s plan of salvation include only humans, or does it include animals, too? In even broader terms, does God intend the *whole* created world to be saved?

As a Franciscan friar for over fifty years, I am very familiar with the stories of St. Francis of Assisi and his close relationship with animals, and these stories have informed the way that I view these things. Perhaps you’ve heard the stories of this brown-robed friar preaching to the birds, releasing Brother Rabbit from a trap, or letting Sister Raven serve as his “alarm clock” to awaken him for early morning prayer. I’ve known for a long time that historians have credited St. Francis with composing one of the first great poems in the Italian language—a poem, or hymn, usually entitled *The Cantic of the Creatures*. In this hymn, sometimes known as *The Cantic of Brother Sun*, St. Francis invites all his brother and sister creatures to praise their Creator—Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Fire and Sister Water, as well

as Sister Earth, our mother, with all her various fruits and vividly colored flowers.

But for years I have pondered the question *Why did St. Francis do all of this?* Deep down, what intuition inspired St. Francis to call them “brother” and “sister”? Some thirty years ago I came to the conclusion, which I’ve never abandoned, that Francis came to see that *all creatures form one family of creation*. Maybe that conclusion is obvious to some or most of you. But for me this idea dawned quite gradually—after many years of getting better acquainted with the life and teachings of the saint. Once Francis’s understanding dawned on me, the conviction has only grown stronger and stronger. This book has grown out of this conviction, and explores the implications of it. What would it mean if all creatures were one family? How would it affect us? How would it change our understanding about God, and about how we relate to God and to each other?

The central purpose of this book, therefore, is to seriously explore the title question, “Will I see my dog in heaven?” But from the start, I am exploring this question in the context of this broader question, “Does God intend the whole created world to share in God’s saving plan?” In the chapters that follow, I present a good bit of evidence—from the Bible and from Christian

tradition—and make a rather strong suggestion of what I believe God desires. I introduce St. Francis of Assisi early into this discussion because he has played such a powerful role in shaping my life, and in enhancing all of humanity's love and respect for the created world. He was one of the most amazing and unique personalities of the thirteenth century, and he has continued to appeal to people of almost every religious persuasion for the last 800 years. For example, Matthew Arnold, the nineteenth-century British poet, referred to Francis as "a figure of most magical power and charm." I believe that the teachings and life of Francis can lead us to discover God's will and saving plan for the whole family of creation.

For more than thirty-six years, I have worked as a writer and editor for *St. Anthony Messenger*, a national Catholic magazine, published by the Franciscan friars of Cincinnati. In our July 2003 issue, we printed an article that I wrote, entitled: "Will I See My Little Doggy in Heaven?" The article generated a lively reaction from our readers, and we received a larger than usual number of letters, suggesting that the topic of animals in heaven is truly a *live* issue. I am happy to share with you a few of these letters, published two months later in our September 2003 issue.



[Dear editors:] Happy days are here again for this 69-year-old who happens to be a lifelong lover of cats! After reading Father Jack Wintz's article "Will I See My Little Doggy in Heaven," I feel for the first time real hope for all those cats I've lost to incurable illness and old age over the years, and for the countless numbers of abused, abandoned, and suffering animals the world over. That article made my day!

[From Doris in Hyattsville, MD]

[Dear editors:] I was thoroughly shocked that the editors of a supposed Catholic magazine would publish "Will I See My Little Doggy in Heaven?"

I was taught that only human beings had immortal souls and free will and, therefore, were able to earn either heaven or hell. When did that change?

How do dogs and other animals know what is right or wrong? Will pit bull dogs trained to kill go to hell for doing what they were trained to do? To quote St. Francis because of his love of nature is a totally unfair interpretation of his ideas.

[From Clayton in Santa Clarita, CA]

The opinions of good Christians are clearly divided on this matter.

We know little for certain about the kind of life we are destined to spend with God in the future, or how animals and other creatures will be included in the picture. But clues abound in three vast available sources—Scripture, our Judeo-Christian tradition, and the example of St. Francis—and all of these sources strongly suggest that other creatures besides humans are included in God's plan of salvation. In the ten chapters of this book you will find much evidence and many hints that God desires the whole family of creation, both humans and animals, to be redeemed and saved. But let's begin with the beginning.

Will I See My Dog *in* Heaven?







# 1.

## And It Was Very Good

In the earliest verses of Genesis, darkness covered everything until God created light to separate the darkness from the light. “And God saw that the light was good” (Genesis 1:4, NRSV). Soon we read that God separated the earth from the seas. “And God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:10). Then God added vegetation, plants, trees,

and fruit. “And God saw that it was good” (1:12). On the fourth day, God put two great lights in the sky: the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night, thus separating light from darkness. “And God saw that it was good” (1:18). These two great lights, which St. Francis would call “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon,” have contributed enormously to the well-being and enjoyment of God’s creatures.

On the fifth day, God created sea monsters and birds of all kinds. “And God saw that it was good” (1:21). On the sixth day, God made land creatures of every kind: “cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind. And God saw that it was good” (1:25). Also on the sixth day, God made human beings, saying, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth” (1:26).

Finally, in Genesis 1:31, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” This “very good” label, which God places here upon both human and nonhuman creatures, seems to me to be an argument for God’s desire to have *both* classes of creatures share in the original Garden of Paradise, where peace

and harmony reigned between God and human beings, upon creature and creature. Certainly, God is not going to create—and then ignore—what he perceives as “very good” creatures.

Would not the Creator’s very decision to create the universe and all the creatures that dwell within it imply an unwritten covenant, or agreement, between God and these creatures? This becomes all the more apparent as we discover throughout the Old and New Testaments that “God is Love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16). This and other passages help us see that God does *everything* out of love, and this includes the creation of our world. God’s words to the people of Israel in Jeremiah 31:13 (NRSV) also come to mind: “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” The Psalms, too, often remind us that God’s “steadfast love endures forever.” In Psalm 136 (NRSV) alone, the refrain “his steadfast love endures forever” is repeated some twenty-five times. We can also cite the celebrated passage in John’s Gospel: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

But before we get ahead of ourselves, let’s look more closely at the Genesis story to discover what we know of God simply as a Creator.

Our God is a God of overflowing love, goodness, and beauty who is ready to give over everything to those he loves. This goodness is reflected in the whole family of creation. When God says of any creature, whether human or nonhuman, that it is “good” or “very good,” it is not simply a matter of moral goodness. The creature also has an inherent goodness and beauty—a beauty that reflects God, who is Beauty itself. Surely the Creator would not suddenly stop loving and caring for the creatures he had put into existence with so much care.

In the original picture we have of the Garden of Eden before the fall, Adam and Eve and all the creatures are living together happily in peace and harmony in the presence of a loving God—a wonderful and insightful glimpse of the paradise that is to come.

It makes sense to me, therefore, that the same loving Creator who arranged for these animals and other nonhuman creatures to enjoy happiness in the original Garden would not want to exclude them from the *final* paradise. If they were happy and enjoying God’s presence, according to their abilities, in that first Garden, would not God also want them to be happy and enjoy the same in the restored garden?

Father Don Miller, a Franciscan colleague of mine, also lives in Cincinnati. He recently told me a sad story from his

childhood. Don's dog Boots, a young German Shepherd, was tragically killed by a car he had been chasing.

"I was devastated," recalls Don, who was nine years old at the time. "On the verge of tears, I asked my parents: 'Is Boots in heaven and will I see him there some day?'"

"This little episode happened in Peoria, Illinois, and my parents took me downtown to Sacred Heart Church to talk with Father Baldwin Schulte, the Franciscan pastor there. I asked Fr. Baldwin whether I would see Boots in heaven. He thought for a moment, and then he turned to me and said: 'Yes, you will see your dog in heaven—if that is what it takes to make you happy.'"

Don reflects, "Now as I look back as an adult, I believe Fr. Baldwin's answer was very wise. Instead of giving me a lot of theology, he basically said that in heaven God will see to it that all who live there are supremely happy. Pastorally, it was a very sound and sensitive answer for me at that time. Once we pass on to the next life and see God face to face, as the glorious source of all that exists, those kinds of questions may not seem so important."

Just as the original Creation was very good with animals as a part of it, so too, it seems, our future lives will be very good and will include animals. No one should presume to tell you or me that we will never again see our pets that died many years ago.

I recall learning in my theology classes that in God there is no past, present, or future. There is only an “eternal now.” Who can say, therefore, that the God who created all things does not hold in memory all the creatures God has ever made? They were created as good, all of creation was very good together, and there’s no reason why that should change in the eternal future.

The Internet, I believe, can actually give us some insights into the ways that God exists and has his being in infinite reach and power. Just as I can instantly communicate electronically with a friend on the other side of the globe or Google all sorts of information at the click of a key, our infinite and loving God can “Google” in a blink the divine memory bank and access any creature he wants. We all exist in God’s eternal now. The World Wide Web is an apt symbol of the infinite reach of God and of God’s power to bring a whole universe together into one big loving family of creation.

The creation story in Genesis says nothing about the future, only about those initial moments when all things were made. But we wonder what will happen in the afterlife—in the new heaven and the new earth that is to come (Revelation 21:1)? This is a big-time mystery. There are many things about our future paradise that surpass

human understanding. We simply do not know what awaits us in heaven. As St. Paul tells the Corinthians, “We teach what scripture calls *the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him*” (1 Corinthians 2:9, JB, emphasis added).

And yet, as Paul told the Athenians at the Areopagus, God is also incredibly near: “He is not far from any one of us. For ‘in him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said” (Acts 17:27–28). All creatures experience God in ways that may always remain mysterious.

The Garden of Eden is not only a story or parable of the way the world was created; it is also a metaphor for the final paradise that our loving Creator envisioned before time began. The prophet Isaiah amplifies this theme when he proclaims that after the Messiah’s mission is complete, “the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them” (11:6). Biblical commentator John F. A. Sawyer describes this passage from Isaiah as a “view of paradise regained.” Similarly, a footnote in the Jerusalem Bible says it represents the “peace of Eden” being restored.<sup>1</sup>

This vision of Isaiah—and that of other inspired biblical writers—provides good evidence that the harmony all creatures enjoyed with God and with each other in the beginning of the creation account is really God’s picture of what will prevail at the end of our story. When God in the beginning looked upon all creatures and declared that they were “very good,” God was not making a useless or careless claim. He meant something enduring was happening—had been set into motion.

Humanity’s attempt to play God, however, destroyed the original harmony that humankind had enjoyed with God in the Garden. And we inherited this propensity to sin and the resulting separation from our first parents. We continue to struggle to achieve harmony with other human beings and the created world. Humanity’s rejection of God’s first blessings had profound results: banishment from the garden, grinding human toil, enmity, and violence with one’s neighbors. The prophets proclaimed that war and oppression would fall upon various peoples because of their sins. They also foretold the coming of a Messiah from the line of King David. And they foretold a time to come when all creation would again be very good—indeed, even better than very good. When the mission of the Messiah is completed, those who walk in step with God’s love will enjoy an era of forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and peace.

We have already enjoyed the vision of peace and reconciliation presented above by the prophet Isaiah (11:6). We now look at a similar peaceful scene painted by the prophet Amos:

The days are coming now  
—it is Yahweh who speaks—  
when harvest will follow directly after plowing,  
the treading of grapes soon after sowing,  
when the mountains will run with new wine  
and the hills all flow with it.  
I mean to restore the fortunes of my people Israel;  
they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them,  
plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
dig gardens and eat their produce.  
(Amos 9:13–14, JB)

## What about “Dominion”?

After God made the first man and woman, he told them to “have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28, NRSV). In order to put this instruction from God into a proper context, we should take a closer look at just what kind of “dominion” God handed over to human beings.

The first thing we see is that the human style of dominion is meant to imitate very closely God’s style as Creator of the world. When we investigate God’s way of exercising dominion over the world and its creatures, whether nonhuman or human, we see a Creator who is loving, gentle, thoughtful, and wise. God creates in a reverent and caring way, making sure that everything is “good” at every stage. God “blesses” the first man and woman and exhorts them to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Like a proud parent, God watches as the earth brings forth vegetation, seed-bearing plants, and living things of every kind. God provides a beautiful garden watered by lovely rivers. There is never a sense that God is acting in a domineering or exploitative way. God’s dominion is one of respect, not of heavy-handed domination. *This* is the way that humans are meant to exercise

dominion over their sister and brother creatures and the created world.

Keith Warner, OFM, is a lecturer and a researcher at Santa Clara University in California. He authored *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth* together with Ilia Delio, OSF, and Pamela Wood. In the following brief excerpts from that book, Warner comments on the meaning of *dominion* in the context of a Franciscan spirituality for our times:

The word *dominion* has a very different connotation today in our scientific industrial society, than in the ancient Near East. God's dominion over all of creation, and our human dominion over the Earth is to echo the love, care, and responsibility that God has toward the created world. God's dominion is founded upon love and justice; it could not be exploitative or abusive.

"Francis's practice of humility," says Warner, colored Francis's approach to creatures. "Francis was a brother to all creation. . . . Francis rejected power, ownership, and authority for himself. He wanted to be humble, to live in solidarity with creation just as Christ did through the Incarnation."

And then:

Learning how to live in relationship is fundamental. . . . Francis was open to relationship, to receiving from all, whether leper, human brother, or sister, worms, birds, bishops, water, fire, wind, or Blessed Mother Earth. Francis recognized the Incarnate Word of God in all living creatures. His openness meant he could recognize the blessing of being brother to all, and his response was humility. He did not practice domination or authority but sought to live as a cocreature.<sup>2</sup>

### For Whom Is This Future Intended?

It is difficult for those who take the Incarnation seriously, and who adhere to a profound creation spirituality, to imagine a final paradise without the creatures that God first created, as well. In Isaiah's case, we see the presence of peace-blessed animals (such as the wolf lying down with the lamb), while in the vision of Amos we see an earthly mix of godly gifts (mountains, hills, vineyards, and flowing wine).

When I try to visualize the final paradise in which animals and humans live together in peace and harmony, I often think of animal blessings that I have taken part in. This is particularly true on the Feast Day of St. Francis, when churches all over the world hold “Blessing of the Animals” services, in which the creatures are often invited into the sanctuary and offered special blessings as members of God’s family. An ideal alternative setting for such a ceremony is a park or a church courtyard with lots of trees and flowers in it and perhaps a fountain or a pool of water.

Ironically, when people bring their pets from different parts of town, there can be disharmony and trouble. Dogs start barking at cats and people struggle to keep animals from fighting, growling, and hissing. But often in my experience, once the blessings begin, a spirit of harmony and peace prevails among pets and people.

(In later chapters, you will read about animal blessings I have attended that resemble the peaceable kingdom described in the Bible.)

Many Christians believe that nonhuman creatures do not have a place in heaven. The reasoning seems to go like this: life with God after death is only possible for human beings who have received the gift of new life with God through baptism. Only humans have intelligence

and free will and thus have the capacity to enjoy fullness of life in heaven. Similarly, animals and other nonhuman creatures do not have human souls and are thus excluded from heaven, according to this mindset.

My comment is this: when we consider the story of Adam and Eve before their disobedience, and we look at the animals, the birds, the fish, the trees and plants in the Garden of Eden, they all seem to be in harmonious and happy relationship with God and with Adam and Eve.

True, the nonhuman creatures do not have human souls, but they obviously have some kind of principle of life in order to do the things they do. An animal that shows affection and loyalty, for example, surely has some kind of “soul” or inner light that allows it to enjoy life and give great joy to its caretakers. A bird that sings a beautiful melody contributes to the world of art and, by reflecting the beauty of its Maker, gives us a bit of heaven in the process. There are a lot of things we just don’t know about life with God, and one of these things is how nonhumans participate in that life.

One thing we *do* know from the Genesis stories is that animals, plants, and other creatures found happiness in the first Paradise. Why then would God—or anyone else—want to exclude them from the paradise that is yet to come? Just as we find clues in the Book of Genesis

that God wants animals and other nonhuman creatures to share such joys, so we will also, in the chapters ahead, find clues in other books of Scripture, and elsewhere, that reveal this same desire on the part of God.

I refer again to the article I wrote for *St. Anthony Messenger* magazine back in 2003—the one that prompted me to write this book. Well, here is another letter that we received in response:

[Dear editors:] I am still jumping up and down over the article about animals in heaven. All observations made by Father Jack are sound references to the fact that God loves all creation and will include all in our heavenly home.

For the past several years, I have organized a “Blessing of the Animals.” In 1972, I had written to Mother Teresa [of Calcutta] to ask for a letter of support. She sent one, over her own signature, and I quote: “[Animals] too are created by the same hand of God which created us. As we humans are gifted with intelligence, which the animals lack, it is our duty to protect them and to promote their well-being. We also owe it to them as they serve us with such docility and loyalty.”

I think Mother Teresa says all there is to say about the sacredness of the animal kingdom.

[From Marlene, Louisville, KY]

Marlene's comment about the "sacredness of the animal kingdom" is only a short step away from the central theme of *Will I See My Dog in Heaven?*—the sacredness of the whole family of creation.





## 2.

## Noah and Jonah

Both of these popular biblical stories—the first from the book of Genesis, the second from the book of Jonah—reveal God's desire to save not only the people of the earth but the animals as well.

## Noah and the Ark

The story of Noah and the ark is simple—it couldn't be more familiar, could it? Most of us knew it as very young children. But our understanding grows, just as our bodies do.

For me, the ark is a wonderful symbol of God's desire to save the whole family of creation. This story makes it very apparent that God's plan is not to save humankind apart from other creatures. We are all in the same boat, so to speak, humans and other creatures alike. As St. Paul writes to the Romans (8:22), "All creation is groaning" for its liberation.

To get the flavor of this ancient story, we turn to Genesis 6:5–8:<sup>3</sup>

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things