

# Souls of Animals and of Men

Genesis 1:20-28



By Daniel Parks

**“Do animals have souls?” One occasionally hears that question.**

*Every living creature has a soul!* The Hebrew word equivalent to our English word *soul*, *nephesh*, “refers to the essence of life, the act of breathing, taking breath” (*Vine’s Dictionary of Old Testament Words*). In the account of the creation of the earth (Genesis chs.1-2), *nephesh* (meaning *soul*) is used of “everything ... in which there is life [*nephesh*]” (1:30), or *soul*. This Hebrew word *nephesh*, meaning “life” or “soul”, is ascribed to all living creatures, whether flying in the air or swimming in the waters (1:20, 21) or moving across the earth (1:24), or man (2:7). Every living creature has a soul!

However, the souls of animals are not like the souls of men.

**First, the souls of animals and of men differ in their origin.**

Animals derived both their bodies and their souls from the ground from which they were made through God’s command (Genesis 1:20f, 24f; 2:19): God commanded that they come forth from the earth with life/souls, and it was so. Man, like the animals, derived his body from the earth (Genesis 2:7a): “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground.” But man, unlike animals, received his soul through a direct and personal act of God,

and from God breathing life into him (2:7b): "God ... breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being/soul."

**Second, the souls of animals and of men are of a different kind.**

God created animals "according to their kind" (Genesis 1:21, 24, 25). Their souls therefore are of their kind. But God made man according to Himself (Genesis 1:26-28): "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness .... So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ...' Men, like God but unlike animals, are *persons*, possessing self-awareness and self-determination which far surpass anything like these qualities in animals. Men, unlike animals, have a *rational* soul, one capable of reasoning in a clear and consistent manner. And men, unlike animals, have a *responsible* soul, one making them accountable to God for their deeds, words, and thoughts.

**Third, the souls of men is of a higher order than the soul of animals.** God said of man, whom God made in His own image and likeness, "... let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Genesis 1:26, 28). Furthermore, man is permitted by God to take the life/soul of animals in order to have their flesh for food (Genesis 9:2f); but man is not permitted to do the same to a fellowman (v.6): "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man." Furthermore still, even an animal that kills a man is to be killed by man (vv.5f).

**Fourth, man's soul has a conscience, but the souls of animals do not.** The conscience is "the soul as distinguishing between what is morally good and bad, prompting to do the former and shun the latter, commending one, condemning the other" (*Thayer's Greek Definitions*). Consequently, man's soul knows that it is morally right to worship God, and morally wrong to kill a man. But the souls of animals know neither.

**Fifth, man's soul, unlike the souls of animals, is capable of sinning, and will die for doing so** (Ezekiel 18:4, 20): "the soul who sins shall die". This is never said of animals, for sin is never committed by them nor imputed to them, and their deaths are not attributable to sins committed by them.

**Sixth, the souls of animals and of man differ in their final destinies.** At death, the *bodies* of both animals and men return to the earth whence they came (Ecclesiastes 3:19f): "For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. ... All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust." But the *souls* of animals and men go to different places (3:21): "the spirit of the sons of men ... goes upward, and the spirit of the animal ... goes down to the earth?"<sup>1</sup> Man's soul goes upward to God to be judged by Him; the souls of animals return to the earth whence they came, for God will not judge them. Of man only, to the exclusion of animals, is it said: "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

**Seventh, the souls of all men go either to heaven or hell, but the souls of animals go to neither.** When men die, their souls return to God for judgment, and from Him are sent to either heaven or hell. But the souls of animals go to neither heaven nor hell, for they return to the earth and cease to exist.<sup>2</sup>

**Eighth, the souls of men are capable of spiritual desires and sentiments never found in the souls of animals.**

This fact also is indicative of man being made in God's image and likeness. For example:

- God's soul is well pleased with Jesus Christ, whom God identifies as "My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased" (Matthew 12:18, quoting Isaiah 42:1). Men's souls are also capable of being well pleased with Jesus Christ as God's Servant, God's chosen, and God's Beloved. But animals' souls do not have this capability.

- God's soul is displeased with anyone who finally and totally apostatizes from his profession of faith, for God says of an apostate, "My soul has no pleasure in him" (Hebrews 10:38). Men's souls are also capable of being displeased with apostates. But men's apostasy is of no concern to animals' souls.

Souls of both animals and men desire physical things, but only man's soul is capable of desiring God (Psalm 42:1f): "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."

The soul that desires God will also express spiritual desires and sentiments not found in animals' souls. The psalmists express many of them, including these:

- *Trust in God* (Psalm 57:1): "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me! For my soul trusts in You."

- *Desire to be separated from sinners* (Psalm 26:9) "Do not gather my soul with sinners, nor my life with bloodthirsty men."

- *Desire for salvation even to the point of exhausting strength* – but not to the point of exhausting faith (Psalm 119:81): "My soul faints for Your salvation, but I hope in Your word."

- *Confidence in being received by God after death* (Psalm 49:15): "God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me."
- *Waiting for God and His salvation* (Psalm 62:1): "Truly my soul silently waits for God; from Him comes my salvation."
- *Yearning to be in God's presence* (Psalm 84:2): "My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God."
- *Rejoicing in God's salvation* (Psalm 35:9): "My soul shall be joyful in the LORD; it shall rejoice in His salvation."
- *Clinging to God* (Psalm 63:8) "My soul follows close behind You."
- *Keeping God's testimonies* (Psalm 119:129): "Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them."
- *Boasting in God alone, not in self* (Psalm 34:2): "My soul shall make its boast in the LORD."
- *Full conviction and deep impression of what God has done* (Psalm 139:14): "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well."
- *Acknowledging and declaring what God has done for the soul of one who worships Him* (Psalm 66:16): "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will declare what He has done for my soul."

Surely it is not necessary for me to tell you that the souls of animals are incapable of such spiritual desires and sentiments. Only man's soul has this capability.

Sir or Madam, what does your soul desire? Does your soul desire God and His blessings in Christ? Then trust in Christ, and He will save your soul. Does your soul desire things other than these? Then hear Christ when He says, "What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

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The Hebrew word translated "spirit" (*ruach*) in Ecclesiastes 3:21 is in this text synonymous with the Hebrew word for soul (*nephesh*), as also in the parallel statements of Isaiah 26:9: "With my soul [*nephesh*] I have desired You in the night, yes, by my spirit [*ruach*] within me I will seek You early.")

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