

Pet Theology

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Whenever I read Genesis 2, something strikes me as funny. When God made Adam, right out of the box, He gave him a job to do. But this job wasn't something *I* would deem important. Adam wasn't ordered to write down laws from on high, to provide governance for this new thing called "civilization." He wasn't asked to build temples—grand houses of worship where God would be glorified forever. He wasn't even given words of prophecy about the future of God's creation or the coming of His Son.

No, Adam's job was ... simply ... to name the animals, which commentators take to mean the various species of animals that roamed the earth. God just paraded them past Adam's front door, and Adam gave them names—whatever came to mind!

Now according to *World Book Encyclopedia*, scientists think there may be as many as 2 million to 50 million kinds of animals alive today. How many were around in Adam's day? Having consulted the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, I can give you a sound biblical answer: *a bunch*. But since naming the animals was Adam's only responsibility, I figure it didn't take long. Soon Adam must have run out of species and started naming *individual* animals.

"*Bessie!*" he declared, pointing at a cow. "On second thought, Bessie sounds cliché for a cow's name and ... *Aw, shoot!* What's that on my shoe?" (By this time Adam and Eve had sinned and were sporting footwear.) Looking down at a monstrous mound of cow-doo, Adam said, "That does it. I'm calling you *Patty*."

On and on the names must have gone: *Pickles, Vinnie, Cornbread, Riley, Satin, FatBoy, Lucky, Texx, Barney, Punkin, Bandit, Pirate...*

(If you're wondering how Adam did it, not knowing a pickle from a pirate, then I have to ask you: How did he know to name a horse "horse" or a pig "pig"? Poetic license. It was big back then.)

Ruminating on the importance God must place on the human/animal relationship—it goes all the way back to Genesis, for heaven's sake!—makes me think of a recent "incident" in our church, when an overzealous Sunday school teacher incited a meltdown among the three- and four-year-olds. You see, when it comes to prayer requests in a preschool Sunday school class, there's really only one kind. *Pet prayers*. Protocol demands that a preschool teacher storm the gates of heaven on behalf of rabbits and kittens and lizards and snakes with the exact same earnestness one might normally reserve for a parent, a spouse or even the President!

However, that morning this poor hapless teacher decided to incorporate a "teachable moment" in the children's prayer time. "Children," she said sweetly to the masses encircled at her feet, "Animals don't have *souls*. This means they *won't go to heaven* the

way you and I will go to heaven. Maybe we should ask Jesus about *more important things*.”

Silence. Then it happened—BOOM!—like nuclear fallout, spilling out from the classroom and engulfing the entire Sunday school wing. Igniting pockets of controversy among the adult congregation—sending them flying to the pastor, the church librarian, even the *janitor*! Anywhere for answers to the greatest theological question to hit our church in decades.

I had just wrapped up teaching my own Sunday school class—and if you must know the truth, I was feeling a tad smug about my level of Bible understanding—when “she” came at me out of nowhere. (By “she,” I refer to the self-appointed “Keeper of Doctrine” at our church. You know the one! I’m guessing she’s at your church, too!) With the “soul question” on her lips and a “stump the band” expression on her face, she waited for my reasoned reply.

That very moment, I knew I was done for. With neither an exhaustive concordance on hand nor time to consult Kay Arthur, I decided to go with my gut.

“Surely you’ve looked into the eyes of a cat you loved—or a dog you had from childhood. The one who ran to meet you every day at the school bus! Who licked away your tears when you cried. Who gets up with you when you’re sick in the night, then cuddles you back to sleep when you return to bed. When you look into those eyes, don’t you see a soul? I do! I see *nothin’ but* soul!”

The Keeper of Doctrine went silent for a minute as I hastily made my exit. To this day I haven’t written Kay Arthur or cracked a commentary. I picture old Adam naming the animals—they’re *precious* to God! And as the country song says, that’s my story and I’m stickin’ to it.

(Later, when I retold this incident to a friend, she saw it from a different angle: “Animals have never *sinned*,” she remarked with authority. “Of course they’ll go to heaven!” Obviously she’s never met *my* cat, who hisses like a sailor and commits murder in his heart every time he gazes at the birdbath.)

My husband Barry, though a gifted Bible teacher, is never one to let theological wrangling tie him in knots. “Heaven is perfect,” he says in a *that-settles-that* voice. “And there’s no such thing as perfect without pets!”

The long-haired, golden-eyed beauty reclining by my side couldn’t agree more. If heaven is *purr*-fect, he’ll be there!