

Q 1.4 Are animals capable of giving and receiving love?

Yes, absolutely! The Bible is clear that animals can both give and receive love. Jesus describes His own love as that of a mother hen for her baby chicks. Balaam's donkey showed extraordinary Christlike love for Balaam by saving his life, despite that love not being reciprocated. Animals are even depicted in the Bible as showing love to God by praising Him. There are also several examples of animals receiving love from God and from righteous people who follow God.

Love is the Holiest Attribute

It is often argued that animals are cognitively inferior to humans and that this cognitive inferiority justifies treating them as commodities to be exploited instead of treating them as beings to be loved. This notion that superior cognition is the benchmark for determining someone's worthiness of being shown love is contrary to Scripture. In the Bible, love itself is deemed the highest and most holy attribute, the essence of God's character: *"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love"* (1 John 4:8, NIV). Therefore as Christians, instead of asking whether or not humans are cognitively superior to animals, we should ask whether or not animals have the capacity to give and receive love. If animals were created by God with the capacity to give and receive love, then this means they were created with the capacity to embody God's most holy attribute. If so, then we should not only treat them with love but also lead them¹ in the way of

¹ "The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the goat; the calf and young lion and fatling will be together, and a little child will lead them; They will neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the sea is full of water" (Isaiah 11:6;9, BSB).

expressing the fullness of this divine attribute they've been gifted with. Let's start by considering what the Bible says about whether or not animals are capable of giving love.

God's Love Compared to a Mother Bird's Love

Jesus compares His love to a mother hen's love for her baby chicks: *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing"* (Matthew 23:37, NIV). This illustration made by Jesus of His love resembling the love a mother hen has for her baby chicks echoes a passage in Psalms where God's love for us is compared to that of a mother bird for her babies: *"He will cover you with His feathers; under His wings you will find refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and rampart"* (Psalm 91:4, BSB). According to these verses, animals are not only capable of showing love but are used as examples illustrating the kind of love God has for us and the kind of love we ought to embody ourselves.² Unfortunately humanity's collective attitude toward animals has not done a very good job of reflecting God's love in how we treat animals.³

² "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12, NIV).

³ "Chickens go from shell to hell as one of the most abused animals in the meat industry, which is truly saying something. Ducks, geese, and turkeys fare no better... a bird is squeezed with tens of thousands of other birds into a stifling warehouse, unable to find room enough to stretch a wing, never to feel a breeze or the warmth of the sun... The life of a 'layer' is even worse than that of a 'broiler'... layers' beaks are seared off with a hot wire (the blades get red hot and both melt and cut through the beak, smoke rises from the beak - sometimes the cut is too high up to make eating normally possible again.)... They are kept in constant light to fool their bodies into churning out more eggs than is normal (a single egg on the breakfast plate means twenty-two hours of misery for the hen) and periodic 'false moltings' mean farmers withhold all food from birds for up to fourteen days. Their hunger must be indescribable as they drop not only their feathers, but up to 30 percent of their body weight." (Newkirk, Ingrid. *You Can Save the*

Balaam's Donkey Shows Extraordinary Love

In Numbers 22, Balaam's donkey saves Balaam's life by showing him extraordinary love, even in the face of Balaam repaying the donkey's kindness with violence toward her. As the story goes, an angel of the LORD came to kill Balaam because he was acting contrary to God, but the donkey avoided the angel by turning off the path they were traveling and into a field. Balaam responded by beating the donkey.⁴ When the angel moved, the donkey again avoided the angel, which again resulted in Balaam beating her.⁵ After this happened a third time,⁶ *"the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?'"* (Numbers 22:28, BSB). The donkey then reasoned with Balaam that his violence toward her was unwarranted.⁷ His eyes were then opened and he saw the angel,⁸ who revealed to him that his donkey he was beating had just heroically saved his life, *"The angel of the LORD asked him, 'Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you, because your*

Animals: 251 Ways to Stop Thoughtless Cruelty. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1999, pages 17-18).

⁴ "When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the path and went into a field. So Balaam beat her to return her to the path" (Numbers 22:23, BSB).

⁵ "Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow passage between two vineyards, with walls on either side. And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD and pressed herself against the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat her once again" (Numbers 22:24-25, BSB).

⁶ "And the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn to the right or left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam, and he became furious and beat her with his staff" (Numbers 22:26-27, BSB).

⁷ "Balaam answered the donkey, 'You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now!' But the donkey said to Balaam, 'Am I not the donkey you have ridden all your life until today? Have I ever treated you this way before?' 'No,' he replied" (Numbers 22:29-30, BSB).

⁸ "Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand. And Balaam bowed low and fell facedown" (Numbers 22:31, BSB).

way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away, then by now I would surely have killed you and let her live” (Numbers 22:32-33, BSB). This revelation resulted in Balaam acknowledging his error and repenting,⁹ which is the exact outcome Scripture says we ought to hope for when showing the kind of extraordinary love Balaam’s donkey showed Balaam, *“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you”* (Proverbs 25:21-22, NIV). The donkey’s unmerited kindness toward Balaam, even to the point of suffering violence at his hand to save his life,¹⁰ is a perfect illustration of the kind of love Christ has for us.¹¹ It is the kind of love we are told to have toward those who seek to harm us, *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”* (Romans 12:21, NIV). Balaam’s donkey repaid his evil beatings with the blessing of continuing to save Balaam’s life.¹²

⁹ *“I have sinned,”* Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, *‘for I did not realize that you were standing in the road to confront me. And now, if this is displeasing in your sight, I will go back home.’* (Numbers 22:34, BSB).

¹⁰ *“Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing”* (1 Peter 3:9, NIV).

¹¹ Love *“always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres”* (1 Corinthians 13:7, NIV).

¹² Some may argue that the donkey was acting from self-preservation rather than from selfless love. This explanation does not fit with the text though because it specifies in Numbers 22:33 that the angel would have killed Balaam and spared the donkey. So self-preservation could not have been the motive. Some may also argue that the donkey was not cognizant of what she was doing. This explanation also does not fit with the text because in Numbers 22:29-30 the donkey reasons with Balaam about her actions, indicating an awareness of what she was doing. The most plausible explanation is that the donkey was consciously saving Balaam’s life while persevering through him beating her.

Animals Can Love God

As demonstrated by the illustrations of God's love being akin to that of birds, animals are clearly able to love each other. Balaam's donkey is a powerful example of the kind of extraordinary love that God calls us to show toward each other, and it is also proof that animals can love people. But animals are not only capable of showing love to each other and to people—they are also capable of showing love to God! It says in Psalms, *"Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Hallelujah!"* (Psalm 150:6, BSB). It is also prophesied multiple places in Scripture that there will come a time when every creature made of flesh will worship God, *"And it shall come to pass That from one New Moon to another, And from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me," says the LORD* (Isaiah 66:23, NKJV). This prophecy of all animals praising and worshiping God is spoken of in detail in Revelation, *"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!'"* (Revelation 5:13, NIV). This imagery of all the animals in the world sitting at the foot of God's throne praising Jesus paints a clear picture that animals are not only capable of loving each other and of loving people but also of loving God!

Animals Can Receive Love

Animals not only have the ability to give love but also to receive it. In Proverbs it says, *"The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel"* (Proverbs 12:10, NIV). There are several instances in the Bible of righteous people showing love toward animals. For instance, when discussing good acts appropriate to perform on the Sabbath, Jesus cites pulling

a sheep out of a ditch¹³ and leading thirsty animals to water.¹⁴ And in order to convey the wrongness of David's actions to Uriah, Jonathan described a rich man killing a poor man's lamb,¹⁵ whom the poor man had loved as a family member, *"but the poor man had nothing except one small ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised her, and she grew up with him and with his children. From his meager food she would eat, from his cup she would drink, and in his arms she would sleep. She was like a daughter to him"* (2 Samuel 12:3, CSB). These examples each demonstrate the capacity for animals to be shown love, and they mirror the common experience of people who have companion animals such as a dog or a cat. Even God Himself shows love toward animals, *"Thou openest thy hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living creature"* (Psalm 145:16, WBT).¹⁶

Questioning Our Attitude Toward Animals

Animals are capable of loving each other, loving people, and even loving God. They also have the capacity to receive love from each other, from people, and from God. These facts should cause us to seriously call into question our practices of enslaving and killing them for appetite, fashion, entertainment, or monetary gain. And that is exactly what God is calling us to do! He wants us to return to our divinely appointed role as keepers and preservers of the whole earth and all of its inhabitants, *"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend עֲבַד (abad) and keep שָׁמַר (shamar) it"* (Genesis 2:15, NKJV). עֲבַד (abad) means to work for or serve, and שָׁמַר (shamar) means to keep, preserve, protect, watch over, or care for. Both words together describe an

¹³ "He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?'" (Matthew 12:11, NIV).

¹⁴ "'You hypocrites!' the Lord replied. 'Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it to water?'" (Luke 13:15, BSB).

¹⁵ "Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him" (2 Samuel 12:4, NIV).

¹⁶ Webster's Bible Translation

attitude of protective, loving service. The same word שָׁמַר (shamar) is used when Cain killed his brother and then flippantly responded to God by saying, *"Am I my brother's keeper שָׁמַר (shamar)?"* (Genesis 4:9b, NIV). God designed us to bear His holy image¹⁷ as keepers and preservers of both people and animals, *"Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep. You, LORD, preserve both people and animals"* (Psalm 36:6, NIV). He did not create us to treat them as commodities to be exploited and harmed in any way our evil hearts can conceive.¹⁸ Instead of treating animals the way Cain treated Abel, God made us to embody the heart of Jesus toward them, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"* (John 10:11, NIV).

Shine Forth God's Love for His Whole Creation!

If animals were designed by God such that they are capable of giving and receiving love, then we should not withhold our love from them. Instead we should show them mercy¹⁹ and neighborly love.²⁰ It is no small thing that God designed animals with the ability to embody His essential attribute. As an act of gratitude toward God, let us shine forth that love God has for His whole creation! As it is written, *"And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them"* (1 John 4:16, NIV).

¹⁷ "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our 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, NKJV).

¹⁸ "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was altogether evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5, BSB).

¹⁹ "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36, BSB).

²⁰ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' 'The one who showed him mercy,' replied the expert in the law. Then Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'" (Luke 10:36, BSB).