

Nature: Animals

Genesis 1:20-25; Genesis 3:1; Genesis 3:14-15; Psalms 140:1-3; Matthew 23:33; Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-15; Matthew 10:16; Genesis 8:8-12; Matthew 3:16-17; Hosea 7:11-12; Genesis 49:8-12; 1 Peter 5:8; Isaiah 53:6; Isaiah 53:7; John 1:29; Revelation 22:3

In this series on Nature, we are exploring the beauty, purpose, and ongoing significance of creation as described in Genesis 1. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, we are looking at how each element of nature reflects God's character, reveals His glory, and points us toward His plan of redemption.

All throughout scripture we see themes, or ideas/concepts that are used over and over again. Nature is one of those things that the writers of scripture use as metaphors to describe people, feelings, circumstances, and paint a picture of humanity and God.

Animals: Read Genesis 1:20-25. God made all kinds of animals and said that they were *ALL* good.

Today we are going to be talking about four animals that show up a lot throughout the Biblical story both literally and symbolically. They all represent different characteristics of God, Jesus, the Spirit, and even Satan. It is important to note that each animal has both good and bad characteristics in different scriptures. We are going to look at both the good and bad of each.

Serpent: Read Genesis 3:1. The serpent used Eve's natural desire toward selfish ambition to motivate her by feeding her doubt and distrust in God. He didn't have to convince her but just opened the door. He was very crafty.

Genesis 3:14-15. The serpent became the symbol of the curse. He was reduced to crawl on his belly in the dust, which is a lowly position yet still dangerous.

We can see examples of this in many popular movies like *The Jungle Book* and *Robin Hood*.

More references to the crafty serpent are: Psalm 140:1-3 (David's prayer) and Matthew 23:33 (Jesus talking to the religious leaders). The serpent directly represents Satan and evil in the scriptures. Can there possibly be any good characteristics?

Read Numbers 21:4-9. The image of the curse becomes the symbol of healing when God intervenes. We see reference to this in John 3:14-15 when the bronze serpent foreshadows Jesus' crucifixion as the source of hope/life.

Jesus even tells his disciples to take on the cunning characteristics of a snake when sending them out into the mission field. Read Matthew 10:16. Being cunning/shrewd/clever can be a good characteristic when balanced with purity/innocence/wisdom.

Dove: The dove contrasts the snake in many ways. The snake crawls on the earth, is dangerous and crafty, and is a symbol of the curse. The dove flies in the air, is safe and gentle, and is a symbol of the promise.

Read Genesis 8:8-12. The dove represents God's promise. Read Matthew 3:16-17. Once again, the dove is flying above the water as a symbol of the promise.

However, the dove can also represent weakness and naivety. Read Hosea 7:11-12. Ephraim was one of the tribes of Israel who had allowed themselves to be influenced into becoming like the other nations around them. They had been easily deceived, turned from God, and lacked the courage and strength to stand firm.

Lion: Read Genesis 49:8-12. Here we see Jacob's blessing to his sons (the 12 tribes). More specifically the blessing for Judah. There is so much symbolism here that we don't have time to get into but he sounds fierce. He is a ruler who is not easily deceived, and is powerful and intimidating. Jesus came from this tribe of Israel (which is why He is referred to as the Lion of Judah).

No one would argue that a lion is not a powerful animal. Yet power, when left unchecked, becomes pride. This can make them dangerous. Read 1 Peter 5:8.

Lions are often used as examples of both good and evil. We can see examples of this in many movies: Scar and Mufasa in *The Lion King*, Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (not safe, but good), the cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz* is an oxymoron, and Lambert in *Lambert the Sheepish Lion* has the strength and power of a lion with the heart of a lamb.

Sheep: Sheep often are used to represent the opposite of a lion. Lions are wild (independent) while sheep are domesticated (dependent). Lions are powerful and sheep are weak. Lions are proud while sheep are humble. Lions fight and sheep follow.

Read Isaiah 53:6. People are often compared to sheep in scripture since we wander aimlessly when we aren't being led by a shepherd.

Jesus became a sheep like us to save us. Read Isaiah 53:7 and John 1:29.

In the Old Testament (Leviticus and Numbers especially) sheep are mentioned regularly as sacrifices. The book of Revelation has many references to a lamb as well. However, instead of sacrifices, the Lamb is worshipped and glorified. The Lamb is the leader.

Read Revelation 5. We see a scroll that is sealed. This scroll is important because it will release healing and set things right. It will restore Eden. But someone has to be able to open it. No one in heaven or earth is found worthy to open this scroll. The Lion of Judah appears as a slain lamb and is the only One worthy to open the scroll.

Read Revelation 22:3.

Application: Each of these represent good and bad characteristics. We are encouraged to represent the good characteristics of each. But what makes the difference? What makes an animal, characteristic, or even us good or bad? It is the influence that we listen to that forms our motivations and that fuels our intentions. It's all about if we are yielding to the Spirit or listening to the flesh.

Challenge: God created all the animals and said they were ALL good. But if we allow ourselves to be influenced in a negative way and listen to the sly, sneaky, and cunning voice of the flesh, we won't get very far.

If we allow the Spirit to fuel us and empower us to be bold, strong, and mighty, we can be roaring lions in this world...roaring the Gospel. But we have to balance that with the purity and humility of the lamb.

We can't just fit into one of these categories. We need a blend. Jesus told His disciples to be clever but pure. We can't just be a dove, or we could easily be a doormat. Yet we can't be overbearing lions. We need the meekness of the sheep. We can't just be a leader in everything...we have to be willing to follow and be led. God calls us to follow Him.

We need to figure out how to balance this in our lives. Each of us has different characteristics. Some may be natural lions while others are natural sheep. How will you learn to balance your characteristics to represent and be who God is calling you to be?

Discussion Questions:

- Consider the influences you have in your life. Do they encourage you to develop good or bad characteristics?
- Reflect on the characteristics we talked about with these four animals.
 - Which one do you relate to most?
 - Are there any of the characteristics you may need to modify/change?
 - How can you balance characteristics from others to be who God has called you to be?