

Introduction

Why Me? and Why This Book?

I'm a Christian and an animal advocate, so I almost never get invited to dinner parties. Inevitably I'll end up talking about Jesus or chickens; also, I know only the worst jokes and am really bad at small talk.

I never thought this was where I'd land—living in a row house in Philadelphia, a seminary degree under my nonleather belt, working full-time for animal protection. When my freshman-year college advisor asked me what I wanted to do, I told him I wanted to run a bed-and-breakfast along the Oregon coast. He pointed out I didn't need a degree for that, so I spent the next six years bouncing from college to college, major to major, mission to mission. I wanted desperately to know that I was doing God's will, making a difference, being a faithful servant.

My parents met and married shortly after becoming Christians in the mid-1970s in Boise, Idaho. I was born into their faith and raised on community, service, and religious dialogue. We read and discussed the Scriptures as a family, and I was encouraged to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I was baptized at ten years old, went to church camp and youth group, listened to bands like Point of Grace and Petra, took a purity oath, and tried really hard to read my Bible every day. As I matured, my parents trusted me with freedom, and I used it wisely—most of the time. I remain deeply grateful to my parents for their wisdom. I hope my husband and I are able to

instill in our son the same yearning for and trust in Christ that my parents showed me.

I've always had a passion for justice. A strong sense of right and wrong. A feeling of solidarity with those who are powerless, bullied, or abused. I thought I could be a lawyer for International Justice Mission, a doctor without borders, a member of the Peace Corps, an equalizer of public education funding, or an activist for the unborn. Though I felt relatively helpless to make a significant impact on the world, the calling to be a friend of and advocate for the marginalized has always been deeply entwined with my faith. Yes, we're justified by faith alone, but our praxis—how we live, how we practice our faith—is an important part of how we deepen that faith and share it with others.

In my early twenties, I went to lunch with my brother and picked up a booklet that changed the course of my life. The tract described the mutilation and abuse suffered by animals raised and killed for food. I read for the first time about the gross resource inefficiency of land, water, and grain in raising animals for food and that there was a direct connection between the meat I ate and someone else's going hungry. I read also about the health benefits of plant-based diets, that they lower cholesterol and dramatically decrease the risk of cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and other life-threatening conditions.

I was first horrified, then angry, then determined and empowered.

I stopped eating animals. Then I stopped buying products that were tested on animals and clothes that were made of animal skins. It was a gradual process.

When I finally graduated college with a degree in political science, a newfound knowledge of the human use of animals, and the ever-present desire to serve, I applied for a job at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). I knew very little

about the organization when I began work there in November 2002, except that it existed and that the motto “Animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment” resonated with me on a deep level.

For nine years, I grew in faith as I grew in knowledge of the horrific ways and endless justifications humans have concocted to use and abuse animals. While a few of my church friends seemed to get it, most of the folks I worshiped with were bemused by, annoyed with, or downright angry at my convictions. And during the workdays, I talked to countless young people who had left the church because of the hypocrisy they perceived in followers of the Prince of Peace, the God of love, who appeared indifferent to the massive scale of suffering endured by God’s created beings at the hands of humans.

I held these two parts of my life apart from each other for a very long time, perhaps because I am slow and thickheaded. Happily, God is patient and creative.

I was sitting in worship one Sunday morning, watching a short video in which music and cool graphics are put to Scripture. The words were from Isaiah, about sacrifice and blood, and as I read them, I found myself thinking, “This would be so powerful with video from factory farms and slaughterhouses behind the words.” Then shortly thereafter, “Sarah, you’re the only one in this room of hundreds who is having that thought.”

Then God spoke. It was a response like we sometimes hear in prayer when we’re able to quiet our hearts and listen for God’s leading. I finally understood that there was a purpose for my passion for Jesus and animals. And my next step became crystal clear: seminary. God was calling me to learn more, to build bridges, and to live into the calling placed on my heart.

My husband and I started to look at seminaries, and we met with the senior pastor at our church to get his blessing. During

that meeting, Pastor Jim asked if I'd ever read *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* by Ron Sider and suggested that I take a look at Palmer Theological Seminary, where Sider taught.

Palmer was in Philadelphia and my husband and I were in Norfolk, Virginia, but God made a way out of no way, and I started classes at Palmer in 2011. I quit my job at PETA because I was commuting and had a scholarship that required me to work for The Sider Center. My first project with the center was to research the environmental impacts of animal agriculture for a chapter one of my professors was writing on the ethics of eating meat. I was home.

For the next three years as I worked toward a master of theological studies degree, I focused on questions surrounding Christianity and animals. Nearly every paper I wrote explored the theological foundation for and practical implications of "animal rights," and when I graduated in May 2014, it was with a depth and breadth of knowledge I'd never imagined possible, along with the humbling awareness there was still much to learn.

Before seminary, I felt conflicted about whether and how my faith really required compassion for animals. I questioned whether my attachment to the ethic of animal care was sentimental rather than biblical.

What I learned is that the church has a rich history of animal protection, and just as the Israelites were "blessed to be a blessing," so all people, made in the image of God, are blessed to bless, not to oppress. I realized being a Jesus follower means giving special consideration to those who are most vulnerable, and being vegan is a natural and good expression of God's grace, mercy, and justice. I call myself and this book "Vegangelical" because caring for animals has helped me appreciate the Good News in deeper and wider ways, and though the work is often heartbreaking, I have hope in a resurrected Christ, who is calling his whole creation home.

Why Me?

Perhaps you've noticed that vegans get tossed onto desert islands and into postapocalyptic survival scenarios more, I think, than the average Josephine.

“Okay, I get why you don't want to eat meat *now*, but if you were stranded on a desert island and had to eat meat to survive, would you?”

“What if it were just you and a dog in a lifeboat, but it could only hold one of you? Who would you save?”

“But if you were being attacked by a bear, you'd kill it, right?”

And then there are the more practical what-ifs:

“What if I shot a deer who'd lived its entire life happily in the forest and died instantly; would you eat it?”

“What if the chicken/cow/pig had a truly happy life and a quick death; would you eat it?”

“What if the chicken/cow/pig had a truly happy life and a quick death; would it be wrong to eat it?”

“What if testing on animals saves human lives? Isn't that good?”

Animal welfarists, when pressed on the second set of questions, will answer that it's ethical to eat animals if they have happy lives and painless deaths, and it's ethical to use them for testing and other means if there is a clear benefit to humans and the animals are treated as well as possible. Most people can claim support for animal welfare. I don't think that's good enough for Christians, though, and especially not Christians who live in affluence relative to the rest of the globe. I'll challenge you, dear reader, to stick with me even if this initial confession makes you feel angry or annoyed or argumentative.

I was in Nicaragua once, working with a small team to install a pump and water-filtration system in a small community's well

and to teach residents about clean-water use and hygiene. We stayed in a home built by hand out of clay and wood, with a corrugated tin roof and a sturdy outhouse. The family kept chickens who freely roamed the small property. One cool night, a mama and her chicks slept underneath one of our cots, cooing back and forth to one another. At dinner the second night we were there, parts of a chicken showed up on the plate I was served for dinner. Not wanting to insult our hostess and the incredible efforts she and her daughters had made to cook for three additional people, I considered just eating what I was served. But I looked at the other food on my plate: sliced and fried potatoes, black beans and tomatoes smothered with fresh avocado, and tortillas that I heard Rosa rise to make every day at 4:00 a.m., and I realized that I didn't need the chicken to sustain myself. Our translator and one of my teammates quietly split the meat between them. We explained the next morning that I didn't eat meat, and I wasn't served flesh again. I got extra avocado, which didn't make me a bit sad!

I looked. I realized. I didn't need.

Why This Book?

While secular thinkers have produced a large volume of literature on the human-animal relationship, only a few Jesus followers have taken up the subject seriously. As a result, even though animals are an integral part of everyday life for most Christians, we have little, if any, theological framework to govern our treatment of animals. This leaves Christians without a biblical approach to issues like factory farming, animal experimentation, and so on. But in a world where it takes sixteen pounds of grain to produce a single pound of beef, where the toxins from factory farms pollute communities and sicken workers, and where

God-created species are disappearing from the face of the planet, these issues simply can't be ignored.

This book is for Christians who are curious about what “animal rights” is all about and why it matters. It's a contribution to a larger body of theology about who we are as humans and how we ought to live in the world. It will cover much but also will leave much unsaid. I hope this book gets you thinking in new ways. At some points, the changes I suggest to our thinking and actions may seem daunting and personal. I'll ask questions, and I hope you will prayerfully consider them and resist what may be a strong temptation to take a defensive posture. I've been having conversations about humans, animals, and God for more than a decade, and I'm still inquiring, discovering, wrestling. There will be many opportunities in these pages for you to do the same.

As I've journeyed along this road, a few theological concepts have come up again and again that I've found particularly helpful in developing a Christian animal ethic: *imago Dei*, dominion and stewardship, and love. I'll talk about each of these in the coming chapters, along with service, worship, and grace. After exploring this theological foundation, I will look at how humans are using animals today, as companions and entertainment and for research, food, and clothing. In the conclusion, I'll offer practical guidance for readers who want to start making changes in their lives to alleviate animal suffering.

Let's get started, shall we?