

"You'll laugh, you'll cry, and you'll say, 'Aw.' Most importantly, you'll be reminded of just how much God cares for you."

RACHEL ANNE RIDGE

Pawverbs

*100 inspirations to delight
an animal lover's heart*



JENNIFER MARSHALL BLEAKLEY



Jennifer Marshall Bleakley has done it again! These collected animal stories will find their way to your heart, just like the lovable creatures in the pages of this book. As you read, you'll laugh, you'll cry, and you'll say, "aww." Most importantly, you'll be reminded of just how much God cares for you. *Pawverbs* is an instant pick-me-up book that will delight readers everywhere.

RACHEL ANNE RIDGE, speaker, artist, and author of *Flash: The Homeless Donkey Who Taught Me About Life, Faith, and Second Chances* and *Walking with Henry: Big Lessons from a Little Donkey on Faith, Friendship, and Finding Your Path*

You and I have the privilege of reading this beautiful volume because Jennifer Bleakley loves Jesus. And loves animals. And, boy, can she write! These stories will generate some fabulous conversations.

MARGOT STARBUCK, author of *Small Things with Great Love: Adventures in Loving Your Neighbor*

I love how God uses creation and especially his creatures to teach us eternal truths. Jen Bleakley follows up her wonderful story of a blind horse named Joey with a book of animal-based proverbs that will warm your heart and instruct your soul.

DAVE BURCHETT, author of *Stay: Lessons My Dogs Taught Me about Life, Loss, and Grace*

Jennifer Bleakley's charming book brings together two of my favorite things: the antics of animals and the wisdom of Proverbs! *Pawverbs* warms your heart as it helps your faith. It's much more than a collection of stories about our furry friends; it's a thought-provoking journey through the book of Proverbs—and your own heart. Some stories bring a laugh; others draw a tear. Each anecdote springboards into a biblical lesson with practical applications to strengthen your faith. *Pawverbs* is the perfect devotional for animal lovers who love the Word of God!

ELIZABETH LAING THOMPSON, author of *When God Says, "Wait"* and *When God Says, "Go"*

Animals and nature are often irreplaceable in conveying the great mercy and faithfulness of the Lord when humans fail us. This tender collection of real-life animal stories takes “creature comforts” to a whole new level. I laughed, I cried, and I discovered renewed assurance of God’s goodness demonstrated through the sweet beasts he has given us. He created this incredible diversity of creatures because he knew we needed their companionship—and what a gift they are! *Pawverbs* is a must-have addition to every animal lover’s library.

AMY K. SORRELLS, author of *Before I Saw You*

Reading *Pawverbs* was the cold drink for which my world-weary soul thirsted. Breaking through division and disheartening news cycles, Jen Bleakley brings us the refreshing stories of our loyal furry friends. At first, I was skeptical that she could tie these sweet stories into Scripture, but I was wrong. Each tale (of tails!) holds a powerful truth, often bringing me to tears as I applied it to my personal life.

AMY CARROLL, Proverbs 31 Ministries speaker and writer, author of *Breaking Up with Perfect: Kiss Perfection Good-Bye and Embrace the Joy God Has in Store for You* and *Exhale: Lose Who You’re Not, Love Who You Are, Live Your One Life Well*

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Pawverbs: 100 Inspirations to Delight an Animal Lover's Heart

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For Darrell, who always believes
I can do more than I think I can.
I love you more than words could ever say.

And for Sunny, Samson, Chief, and Bailey, four of the
greatest animals to ever grace this planet. Your time with us
was far too short, but the love you gave us and the lessons you
taught us will live on in the pages of this book
and in my heart forever.



Introduction

THROUGHOUT MY CHILDHOOD I had a menagerie of pets—rabbits, outdoor cats, goldfish, and even a grasshopper named Georgie. And while I desperately wanted a dog, I was never able to talk my parents into getting one.

As a painfully shy child, I often found it easier to connect with animals than I did with people.

Animals felt safer.

They didn't expect anything from me, and I didn't have to worry about what I said or what I looked like around them. They just offered the simple gift of companionship without the burden of my having to try to be someone I was not.

My pets were my very best friends and the keepers of all my secrets. But they were more than just my companions. In many ways, my pets became some of my greatest teachers. They've illustrated the importance of being present and listening; showed me what loyalty and trustworthiness look like; and helped me find my voice and be brave enough to share it.

While writing my first book, *Joey*, the true story of a blind horse who became an effective and inspiring therapy horse, I became acutely aware of the special connection people can form with animals.

Many people have discovered the blessings and benefits animals can bring to humans.

I think one of God's greatest kindnesses to us was filling this planet with animals—who can't talk, or post on the internet, or roll their eyes—but who are willing to just sit with us and be a friend.

But even more than offering us companionship, I believe God has given us animals, ultimately, to point us to himself—to the one who promises to never leave us. He loves us more than we can fathom and offers us peace, strength, joy, and hope.

I've become convinced that animals can be tangible manifestations of God's grace—whether they have paws, claws, or hooves! These fuzzy, furry, scaly, and feathery ambassadors point us to him and teach us how to live a life of joy.

The idea of animals being our teachers was the inspiration behind this book. *Pawverbs* is a collection of a hundred short stories, each one featuring a real-life animal and tying it to a principle or lesson from the book of Proverbs.

Several of the stories and photos in *Pawverbs* are of pets I've had throughout the years. But most were submitted by friends, family, coworkers, and even strangers who now feel like family.

And while each story is true, some happened a long time ago and were written from collected memories; others have had names and identifying details changed for privacy; and a few timelines have been adjusted for a more cohesive narrative. But the heart and integrity of the stories are all based on actual events.

Remember how I said I could never convince my parents to get a dog when I was growing up? Well, after getting married, I finally got a dog—in fact, we've had three Golden retrievers in our family over the years. Gracie is our most recent Golden girl and her antics have been a rich source of material.

At the end of each story, you will find a “Paws & Ponder . . .” and a “Paws & Pray” to prompt you to go deeper into the story and see a spiritual truth that might impact your own heart.

This was actually my biggest takeaway as I wrote this book—the realization that oftentimes the divine is hiding in the midst of the mundane.

Each day, I ask God to help me see things as they are, not as they appear to be. And my own pets—Gracie, a cat named Foxy, a bearded dragon named Captain Tim, and a beta fish named Barry—have been great teachers in helping me “paws” and pay attention so I don't miss a glimpse of our Creator.

Pawverbs brought such peace and joy to my soul when I was writing it, and I pray it will do the same for you as you read it.

With love,

Jen



**Fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health
to your body and nourishment to your bones.**

PROVERBS 3:7-8, NIV

1

AN ITCHY LESSON

Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.

This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.

PROVERBS 3:7-8, NIV

THE DOG SCRATCHED and nibbled at her belly.

“Mom, Luna’s chewing at herself again,” ten-year-old Haley reported.

Angie looked at the inflamed, crusty sores on their chocolate Lab and knew it was time to make an appointment with the vet. She also knew how much Luna dreaded a trip to the vet. It always turned the normally happy-go-lucky two-year-old dog into a terrified, shaking scaredy-cat.

After dragging the trembling sixty-five-pound canine into the vet clinic, Angie sat with her dog in the exam room, awaiting the doctor’s diagnosis.

“Allergies. Most likely a food allergy.”

Angie had been plagued by allergies her entire life, so she empathized with Luna’s suffering. She laughed at the coincidence. “Well, leave it to me to have a dog with allergies!”

The vet sent Angie and Luna home with antibiotics, anti-itch tablets, and a low-allergy food, and after a few days Luna’s sores quickly healed. But they needed to pinpoint the source of the allergy through a process of elimination. So he put Luna on a strict diet to cleanse her system. Then, they reintroduced foods one by one. When Angie gave Luna a bit of chicken after a month into the process, the Lab started scratching again.

“I think we’ve found the culprit,” the vet said, handing Angie a new prescription for anti-itch tablets. “No more chicken for you, Miss Luna.”

Once the medicine took effect, the tender spots disappeared, and Luna was itch-free—for a few weeks.

Then Angie noticed welts on Luna's belly again.

"I just don't understand," Angie lamented to her husband. "She hasn't had an ounce of chicken. I feed her myself, and I know the kids haven't given her anything." After all, she had warned them. If they gave Luna any chicken, they would be paying for the next vet visit.

"Maybe she's allergic to something besides chicken," her husband suggested.

Angie opened the patio door for Luna as she continued to contemplate the situation. Instead of taking an immediate right toward the steps leading to the yard, Luna bounded to the left, where Georgia, the cat, was finishing her dinner on the patio table. Before Angie could react, Luna jumped up like a kangaroo, swiped at the stainless steel food bowl, and devoured the rest of the cat's dinner—looking oh so pleased with herself when she finished.

"When did she start doing that?" Angie wondered aloud as she raced after Luna.

Walking back into the house, she picked up the can of cat food she had opened that day for Georgia's dinner. *Creamy Delights: Chicken Feast.*

The cat food! No one ever thought to check the cat's food.

Of course, no one realized Luna had acquired kangaroo skills either.

With the mystery solved, Angie decided to move the cat's bowls into the garage, near the little cat door. She also figured it couldn't hurt to keep the cat on a chicken-free diet too, just in case Luna figured out how to start opening garage doors!

PAWS & PONDER . . .

When have you relied on your own wisdom instead of trusting in God's? What was the result? What cravings do you need to submit to God? How might things be different if you were to choose to trust God's way over your own?



Paws & Pray

Lord, so often I think I know best and choose my own way over yours. I confess that I crave things that ultimately harm me. Please forgive me and help me to trust you more. Help me to see you as you truly are: the almighty God—holy, righteous, loving, and good. Enable me to turn away from sin and turn toward you.

2

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

*When people's lives please the LORD, even their
enemies are at peace with them.*

PROVERBS 16:7

“NO MA’AM!” Jessica yelled, as she walked into the family room. Their beagle, Emma, was using the family’s new cat, Carey, as a chew toy. “We do not eat our friends!”

Jessica tightly held Emma by the collar as Carey bolted down the hall. Emma lunged forward, clearly wanting to give chase.

“Oh no, you don’t, missy,” Jessica chastised. “You are going to leave that cat alone and be nice!”

Ever since the family had adopted the sweet-natured cat in need of a home, their beagle had become obsessed with getting rid of her. Emma barked at Carey, chased her, stole her food, grabbed her by the neck, and had recently begun chewing Carey’s tail while the poor cat hissed and scratched in protest. Jessica was done with Emma’s behavior. Surely, a dog and a cat could share a home peacefully.

It was time to begin training Emma in earnest. Jessica taught her the “leave it” command—which applied to the cat, her food, and the litter box. She also taught Emma to lie on a particular cushion in the family room, on the opposite side of the room from the cat’s bed. In addition to rewarding Emma when she responded to the new commands, Jessica also gave her a piece of kibble every time the cat entered a room, training Emma to run to her human instead of the cat.

“Good girl, Emma!” Jessica praised her dog one morning, several

weeks into their new training. Emma had walked right by a sleeping Carey, without so much as a sniff in her direction. And the night before, when the family had piled on the sofa to watch a movie together, Emma had curled up with Jessica's daughter, Laci, while Carey had snuggled with her sons, Leyton and Seth.

After praising Emma, Jessica walked into the kitchen to pour herself a cup of French roast coffee, relishing a few tranquil moments. She inhaled the aroma of her coffee and soaked in the quiet peaceful morning.

"Mom!" Laci shouted from upstairs. "Leyton won't get out of the bathroom, and I *have* to get ready!"

Jessica heard her daughter pounding on the door.

"I'm not done! Hold your horses!" Leyton yelled through the door.

More pounding.

Jessica looked at Emma and Carey, now lying less than five feet from each other.

Wonder if some kibble treats would work on my kids too? she thought with a sigh.

PAWS & PONDER . . .

Living peacefully with the cat did not come naturally for Emma, the beagle. It required training. How might this truth apply to your life? How can you train yourself to better hear God's voice and obey his commands? Is there someone you are struggling to get along with and need God's help for a peaceful solution?



Paws & Pray

Lord, train me to hear your voice and obey your commands. I realize that humility and sacrifice are essential qualities for living a life of peace, but they do not come naturally to me. Help me to live in a way that pleases you. Let your peace fill me and then be extended to those around me.

3

WHERE'S PLUTO?

Smiling faces make you happy, and good news makes you feel better.

PROVERBS 15:30, GNT

“**PLUTO’S GONE!**” John shouted with panic in his eyes. “Ana, where is Pluto?!”

The teenage siblings were on the deck, cleaning the tank their leopard geckos shared. John had put his gecko in a temporary enclosure—a plastic food container with a partially secured lid—but now he was gone.

“He’s a six-inch-long reptile, John,” his older sister said, glancing to make sure her gecko was still in its temporary container. “He couldn’t have gotten too far.”

Her words were not calming. John frantically searched the deck, then he ran down the small set of stairs to peer under the deck. All he could see were piles of leaves, rocks of various shapes and sizes, cast-off gardening tools, and an old wheelbarrow.

“Should we get Coco to search for him?” Ana asked.

John’s stomach lurched at the suggestion. He didn’t want their eighty-pound German shepherd finding and gobbling his small gecko.

“No!” John shouted.

Hearing the commotion, John and Ana’s parents joined the missing gecko search party. But after hours of searching every inch of the yard and house, the search party was called off.

Pluto was cold-blooded and needed heat—he had never been without his heat lamp.

John was heartbroken.

He loved his little reptilian friend and hated the idea of his spotted buddy alone and cold. And he couldn't even let himself think about his gecko becoming a meal for some hungry creature foraging at night.

Day after day John would go out with a flashlight and look for Pluto under the deck, hoping for any sign of his gecko. Temperatures were dropping into the low forties at night, the rain had been relentless, and a fox had been seen on their home security cameras several nights in a row. There was no way his pet could still be alive.

Eventually John resigned himself to the fact that Pluto, the world's greatest leopard gecko, was truly gone.

But then, three months after Pluto disappeared, John received a call from friends who lived in his neighborhood. They had seen a post on a neighborhood app about someone finding a strange spotted lizard in their garage. The person was asking if anyone knew what kind of lizard it was and what they should do with it.

John's friends took a screenshot of the lizard in question and sent it to him.

"That's Pluto!" John shouted into the phone. "That's *my* strange spotted lizard!"

After contacting the family who had found the lizard, John and his parents went to retrieve Pluto—almost a mile away!

Somehow John's little gecko had managed to safely cross a busy neighborhood street, meander through wooded areas and private yards, safely avoid hungry predators, and find his way into a garage in the middle of a heavy rainstorm.

John took Pluto home, placed him safely inside his tank, and secured the lid—checking it twice.

"Pluto, what an adventure you have had," John said as he admired his tough gecko. "But from now on, I think I'm gonna clean your tank . . . inside the house!"

PAWS & PONDER . . .

What good news have you received recently? How did that news make you feel? The word *gospel* is often translated as “Good News.” What makes the gospel message—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—such good news? How could you share that life-changing Good News with someone today?



Paws & Pray

God, your Word is full of good news—from your own lips declaring your Creation good, to your angel messengers heralding your good news to others when Jesus was born, to the life-changing good news of the gospel. Father, help me to share your Good News with others and to be generous in sharing what you have done in my life. Let my demeanor reflect the transforming power of the gospel.

4

A JOB FOR PEPPER

Laziness leads to poverty; hard work makes you rich.

PROVERBS 10:4, CEV

PEPPER LOVED TO WORK. From the moment the black and gray Australian shepherd awoke in the morning, she had one important mission—retrieve the paper. Pepper took her job very seriously.

So seriously, in fact, that some Sundays when the paper was too thick and heavy to fit in her mouth, Pepper would push it toward the house with her nose. Her owners, Kathy and Mike, were both amused and inspired by her persistence.

One Sunday, the newspaper had landed partly in some bushes near the driveway, making it impossible for Pepper to push it with her nose. She dug at the paper, frantically trying to grab it. When Kathy noticed Pepper's predicament, she went outside to help.

"That's okay, girl," Kathy said, collecting the newspaper. "I'll get it today."

Kathy turned to walk back to the house, but Pepper didn't move.

The dog sat at attention—head cocked to the side, ears up, eyes focused on the paper in Kathy's hands.

"Come on, Pepper," Kathy called. "Let's go inside."

But Pepper remained motionless, still staring at the paper.

Impressed by the commitment her dog had to her job, Kathy slid the paper from the plastic sleeve, pulled out the city/state news section, and handed it over.

Kathy chuckled as Pepper proudly carried her section of the paper

into the house. Granted, large areas were illegible smudges because of Pepper's drool. But the Aussie was proud of herself. She had been trained for a job, and she took pleasure in completing that job every day.

With the delivery completed, Pepper devoured a bowl of kibble, spent some time in the backyard, and enjoyed a belly rub before falling asleep at Kathy's feet—likely dreaming of thinner papers tossed in open areas.

As Kathy read the paper, her gaze kept drifting to Pepper. She couldn't help but be convicted.

"God," Kathy prayed, "make me more like my dog—eager and happy to do the work you set before me. Give me the confidence and perseverance to complete each task. And if I can't, please send someone to help me."

Still sleeping, Pepper let out a series of muffled yips that sounded like chuckles.

"And yes, Lord," Kathy added with her own laugh, "if you send someone to help me, I promise I will still do my part and carry my own section."

PAWS & PONDER . . .

How do you feel about work? Do you think today's proverb is referring only to monetary riches as a reward for hard work? What other kinds of riches might this verse be addressing? Is there a task God has given you that you haven't started? What is holding you back? Would you make a commitment to him right now to complete that task as an act of worship and love?



Paws & Pray

Lord, some days I am discouraged at work. Please help me see that no matter what I do, it is work that you have given me to do. If I need assistance, let me set aside my pride and seek it. I want to approach each task as an act of love and worship. Show me how to find that balance between hard work and rest that you desire for my well-being.

5

SCRAM

*The glory of the young is their strength; the gray hair
of experience is the splendor of the old.*

PROVERBS 20:29

NO ONE REMEMBERS the little red dachshund's actual name. But from the moment three-year-old Caroline put her hands on her hips and called *scram*—the word she most associated with the dog who was always getting underfoot—the name stuck.

And Caroline's affection for him did too.

In many ways the tough little dog served as an anchor for Caroline through the ups and downs of her childhood. Her dog's tenacity, strong will, and ability to overcome any challenge inspired Caroline to get back up every time life knocked her down.

When Scram was hit by a car and survived, five-year-old Caroline knew she could get through her parents' divorce.

When Scram was attacked by a larger dog and his wounds eventually healed, Caroline believed that the wounds on her heart might one day heal as well.

And when Scram recovered from heartworm, which nearly took his life, Caroline knew she could recover when she had to leave her little friend behind as she moved with her mother to a new house.

The little dachshund went to live with her grandpa Alton. Caroline was glad she would still get to see Scram, but she was heartbroken that it wouldn't be every day.

She quickly realized, however, that her grandpa needed Scram just as much as she had.

Grandpa Alton loved Scram. He called him his little buddy, and the two were virtually inseparable.

As Scram aged, his slower pace was perfectly suited for Grandpa Alton. The two would sit together for hours on the back porch, nap together in Grandpa's favorite chair, and watch TV together every night.

And when Grandpa Alton felt like a short walk, Scram was always happy to accompany him.

The two were perfectly suited for each other.

When Scram died, Grandpa Alton cried for hours before burying his buddy in the backyard and marking his grave with a cross.

Over time Grandpa Alton's grief lessened, and he lived several happy years—although he never did get another dog.

Eventually, Grandpa Alton got sick, and his family knew his time on earth was coming to an end. Caroline came over one day, and her grandpa told her about a dream he had.

"I heard scratching at the back door, and when I opened the door, there was Scram! He looked at me, barked, and then started to walk away."

Tears rolled down his cheeks. "I know it won't be long now. Scram made me feel it was okay for me to leave all of you."

Grandpa Alton died a month later.

Caroline was so glad that Scram had been there for her grandpa, just like he had been there for her when she was a little girl.

Two lives were forever touched by the life of one special dog.

PAWS & PONDER . . .

Who has influenced your life from childhood to adulthood? In what ways have they influenced you? What benefits might come from friendships between young and old?



Paws & Pray

Father, thank you for everyone you have put in my life, especially people who are younger and older than I am. I value their gifts, which are different from mine. Together, we can use those gifts to support and help each other.