

# CHASING METHUSELAH

**Why Christians should take a longer-term view than anti-aging technology can provide.**

**E**ver since Adam and Eve were banned from the Garden, unable to eat from the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:22), humanity has been on a persistent quest for physical immortality. Through science, technology, sanitation, and other discoveries, our life spans have doubled from the nasty, brutish, and short days allotted to us less than two centuries ago. Now, it appears, we are prepared to take a quantum leap, according to Todd T. W. Daly in his *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* article “Chasing Methuselah.” Daly writes, “Over the past decade, the search for the fountain of youth has moved from legend to laboratory.”

But this quest for physical immortality—or, at the least, a vastly longer life—raises a number of questions, particularly for Christians. Is a longer life an unadulterated good, even when pursued ethically? Is death a disease that needs to be cured? Does mortality bring us anything good that we would miss if it were conquered? How does life extension fit into the Christian hope for a bodily resurrection?

**Scripture:** Genesis 2:15–17; 3:6–12, 22; Psalm 90; John 21:17–23; 1 Corinthians 15:14–28; Philippians 1:20–26

**Based on:** The article “Chasing Methuselah,” by Todd T. W. Daly, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, January 2011



# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY

This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.



- 1** Make enough copies of the article for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader's guide for them as well.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

## Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

*Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Chasing Methuselah" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.*

People in our era are afraid of death—the inevitable but unmentionable terminus of a secular existence. Want to make some real money? Then promise something that will keep the Grim Reaper at bay. Todd Daly notes, "While the chance of reaching the upper biological limit of 120 years is extremely remote, the prospect of a greatly extended and healthy life is alluring. Nearly 100 million Americans currently use anti-aging products and practices. Among these practices are special diets, such as 'The 120-Year Diet,' from Roy Walford (who died of Lou Gehrig's disease two months before his 80th birthday), plastic surgery, vitamins, mineral supplements, human growth hormones, and other hormones like melatonin, testosterone, pregnenolone, and estrogen."

It's one thing, however, to note this nervousness about our mortality among non-Christians, who have no sure hope of life beyond the grave. It's another entirely when we see Christians display that same kind of discomfort with the aging process. So is it wrong to want to live better and longer? What are the limits of human life and of our pursuit of more of it? Can we pursue both quantity and quality of life while remaining faithful to Christ?

### **Discussion Starters:**

- [Q] What are some of the most interesting anti-aging products you have seen on the market?
- [Q] What approaches do people use to look younger, feel younger, and be younger? Is there anything wrong with our fascination with youth? Why or why not?
- [Q] Describe a time when a person close to you became seriously ill or died. How did he or she handle the experience? How did you handle it?
- [Q] Are you afraid of death? Why or why not?
- [Q] What are some good reasons to live longer?

## Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETHERNAL PRINCIPLES**

**Teaching Point One: Human knowledge alone is an inadequate basis for living a good life.**

Today's anti-aging technologies seem to assume the maxim "If we build it, they will come." However, the prior question never seems to get asked: *Should* we build it? Answering that question requires something beyond knowledge, and that something is wisdom. How do we understand aging—as a natural part of life, or something else? Daly writes, "The more fundamental question is whether human aging is a malady in need of a cure. Should we treat aging as a disease? Is there anything wrong with hoping to live to age 150? And, particularly for Christians, is it wrong to want to live past threescore years and ten?"

Read Genesis 2:15–17; 3:6–12, 22.

**[Q]** What is the man commanded to do in the Garden (2:15)? What applications does this command have for our lives in God's world today?

**[Q]** What are the consequences of disobedience for Adam and Eve?

**[Q]** Notice the reasons the man and woman give for disobeying God. Do you see any of the same kind of utilitarian approaches in the current discussion about life extension? Explain.

**[Q]** Why does God keep the man and woman from living forever (3:22)? Why was their knowledge inadequate for the possibility of eternal life?

**[Q]** Do we have the same problem? Why or why not?

**Optional Activity:** *Ask your group's members to write down in a paragraph how they would use 30 extra years of life. Then read and discuss the answers. When finished, ask: How many of our ideas are human-centered? How many are God-centered?*

### **Teaching Point Two: Wisdom comes from putting our lives in proper perspective.**

Daly says that the Hebrew Scriptures generally say that long life is a sign of blessing and short life a sign of punishment. "The Old Testament describes the 'prolonging of one's days' as a reward for obedience (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:33; Prov. 3:1–2)," Daly notes. "Conversely, the dwindling length of human life in the first few chapters of Genesis suggests that wickedness shortens life (e.g., Gen. 6:3). Indeed, the wicked will not live out half their days (Ps. 55:23). However, the Bible also reminds us that wisdom can prolong one's limited life span (Prov. 9:11). Either way, the writer of Ecclesiastes laments that the wise and foolish alike must die (2:16)." Given that death, whether after a long life or a short one, is inevitable, how are we to view our mortal existence? Read Psalm 90, which goes a long way in instructing us.



**[Q]** The writer, Moses, starts the psalm by affirming that God is the only foundation for life (vv. 1–2). Is he that for you? How do you know?

**[Q]** In verses 3–11, we see the Lord's power and control over our lives. List the ways Moses describes God's sovereignty over human life. Why do we so often fail to take note of God's prerogatives in our thinking about human life?

**[Q]** Moses then asks the sovereign Lord to bless his people (vv. 12–16). What specific things does he ask for? Is he focused on quality of life or quantity of life? In what ways is God invited to bless human life?

**[Q]** Have you ever asked God to establish your work as the foundation of your life (v. 17)? Why or why not?

**[Q]** In view of life's brevity, what specific things would you like the Lord to establish? Do they involve relationships? Finances? Career? Anything else?

### **Teaching Point Three: Jesus Christ's resurrection undoes the death brought to all of us by Adam.**

In Christ we see death defeated and turned back. This triumph begins in the life of Jesus, then continues in his death and bodily resurrection. "The New Testament shows that the teachings and resurrection of Jesus relativize the significance of one's life span," Daly says. "Worrying won't lengthen life by even a single hour, says Jesus (Matt. 6:27). Paul echoes this when he proclaims that 'to live is Christ and to die is gain' (Phil. 1:21). Yet Jesus' ministry included extending others' lives by healing the sick and bringing the dead back to life (Luke 7:14–15, 8:52–55; John 11:38–43). Thus, Jesus confronts us as one who sought to undo life-shortening disease, but who also conquered death by succumbing to it." That conquering happened at the Cross and brought the possibility of triumph to all who believe.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:14–28.

**[Q]** Paul tells the Corinthians that the resurrection of Christ is absolutely central to the Christian faith. What do we lose as Christians if he is not raised (vv. 14–19)?

**[Q]** What do we gain if Christ has indeed been raised (vv. 20–23)? How does Jesus undo Adam's curse (v. 22)? What is the guarantee that we will be raised (v. 23)? How does this perspective help us face the prospect of death?

[Q] Paul describes the coming of the kingdom in its fullness (vv. 24–28). How is that time to come different from the time we live in now? What is the focus of the Christian supposed to be? When will death finally be destroyed (v. 26)? What does this say about our efforts to fight it now, both positively and negatively?

[Q] How can we have a Godward focus now?

#### **Teaching Point Four: Length of life is secondary to doing God's will.**

Daly discusses the desert fathers, who fasted not to gain quantity of life but to experience a new quality of life. And yet some gained quantity of life, too. “For the desert fathers, the goal of fasting was not to live longer,” Daly says. “Rather, it was a crucial first step in submitting the body to the soul. This, in turn, brought the soul into submission to God. Only after one had effectively quieted the impulses of one's body could one most effectively begin to till up the hardened soil of one's heart.” Whether we live short or long lives is in the Lord's hands, but we can please him either way by doing what he says.

Read John 21:17–23. The risen Jesus has appeared to his disciples and is in the process of restoring Peter to leadership. For the third time he asks whether Peter loves him, and Peter affirms that he does. This love is paired with God's call on Peter's life, to feed his sheep (v. 17).

[Q] Peter turns and sees John and asks about his fate. Jesus says, in effect, “Whether John lives longer than you is none of your business. Your task is simply to follow me.” Why are such comparisons unproductive?

[Q] Church history shows that Peter died a martyr's death about three decades later, while John's calling continued on to extreme old age on Patmos. The length of their lives differed, but not their faithfulness to God. How can we be faithful, obedient servants whether God gives us many years or few?

#### **Teaching Point Five: Death with Christ is far better than life without him.**

Read Philippians 1:20–26.

[Q] Paul is in prison for sharing the gospel but his heart is unchained. Facing the possibility of death, Paul is torn about whether life or death is better. How does fear of death scramble our spiritual priorities?

[Q] How can we, like Paul, face death with confidence?

**[Q]** Verse 21 is Paul's famous line, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Now we see the source of his courage. Accustomed to living with Christ moment by moment, Paul is ready, even eager, to meet with him at the end of this life. Contrast this with our society's avoidance of death at any cost. Why are these two approaches so different?

**[Q]** Paul acknowledges that God may have work for him to do but admits he is ready to "depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." Do you feel the same way? Why or why not?

**[Q]** How can we cultivate an eagerness to meet with Christ while maintaining our very real responsibilities?

### Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Much of the modern desire for endless life—or at least for a painless and long life—comes from fear of death and a godless attitude that makes us the center of our own universe. With our gaze turned inward, we cannot see any good in our limitations, including our mortality. It's true that long life is a blessing and foreshadows the endless life offered to all God's children. But no life that excludes God, the author of life, is worthy of the name. Earlier we looked at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life, and concluded that mere human knowledge isn't sufficient to bring us life. We need wisdom from God to live a good, but not necessarily long, life.

More than that, we need the life that only God can grant. Daly notes, "In light of the Christian narrative, current attempts to extend life have confused the Tree of Knowledge for the Tree of Life, from which we have been cut off. But life has come to us through another tree—the Cross—through which death has not been eliminated but conquered." Life comes not through the ceaseless accumulation of knowledge, but from the One who created us, offers to redeem us, and knows the times allotted for us.

**Action Point:** *As a group, visit someone from your congregation who is in a hospital or nursing home. Don't deny the presence of death but seek to infuse this dark reality with the life and joy of Jesus.*

— Stan Guthrie is author of *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us* (Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a monthly column for [BreakPoint.org](http://BreakPoint.org) and [Crosswalk.com](http://Crosswalk.com). Stan blogs at [stanguthrie.com](http://stanguthrie.com).

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)

- **Death:** This 6-session study will help you and your group think more about the inevitable experience we'll all face in numerous ways. How can we improve our ministry to the dying? What do you think it was like for the friends of Jesus between his death and resurrection? When do you think it's appropriate to contact someone after that person has lost a loved one? If after death we are already in the joy of God's presence, what exactly do we gain from a bodily resurrection?
- **Revelation: Eternity—Beyond Death's Door:** The Book of Revelation is full of mystery and wonder. It paints amazing pictures of what is to come. The purpose of this 5-session study is to provide a biblical understanding of what death is and where it leads. The Bible provides several authoritative definitions of death and a convincing promise of an afterlife.
- **Facing Our Fear of Death:** Life, most of us realize, has many lessons to teach us. But if we are honest, we will admit that we think far less about our death and about what the great transition can teach us. We fear it much and discuss it little. Yet death can give us valuable insight into life.
- **Dying & Going to Heaven:** Perhaps Christians don't spend enough time thinking about dying and going to heaven. The preacher of Ecclesiastes tells us "He has also set eternity in hearts of men . . ." This 12-session study plan will help you think about the many aspects of this.

 **The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come**, by Rob Moll (IVP, 2010). How should Christians care for the dying? How can we honor their last days, grieve for them, then learn to let go? Moll, an award-winning journalist, revisits Christian theology and church history (e.g., John Donne, the *Ars Moriendi*) for guidance, and interviews pastors, ethicists, and hospice workers.

 **A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss**, by Jerry Sittser (Zondervan, 2004). Loss in life is inevitable, but it's possible to harness the hardship of loss and turn it into a positive event in your life. Author Jerry Sittser explores painful events like divorce, death, and illness and shows that it's not the circumstances we find ourselves in at these points of loss, but how we respond to them that widens our spiritual capacity to experience blessing and growth in the midst of grief.

## Christianity Today Bible Study

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### Leader's Guide

📖 **One Minute After You Die**, by Erwin Lutzer (Moody Publishers, 2007). Someone you know is about to pass away. Will they enter delight? Or horror? Many people spend more time planning for a vacation than preparing for eternity. Perhaps it doesn't seem real that we will still exist—fully conscious and alive—beyond the grave. But it's true, and it calls for careful consideration.

🌐 **"Healthy Aging,"** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/aging/>.



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OST OF US will not be as fortunate as Madame Jeanne Calment. The Frenchwoman died at the age of 122 on August 4, 1997. Somewhat of a local celebrity in her hometown of Arles, Calment took up fencing at age 85 and was still bicycling into her second century, attributing her longevity to a diet of port wine and olive oil. Her story bears testimony to the fact that humans are living longer. Due primarily to medical advances that have nearly wiped out tuberculosis and smallpox, lowered infant mortality rates, and improved sanitary conditions, life expectancies for most people in the 21st century have doubled since the middle of the 19th century.

## Chasing Methu

Yet these increases in longevity have been accompanied by a host of age-related diseases, including Alzheimer's, dementia, incontinence, decline in vision and hearing, and the irretrievable loss of muscle and bone mass. Even the remarkable Ms. Calment spent most of her final two years in bed.

While the chance of reaching the upper biological limit of 120 years is extremely remote, the prospect of a greatly extended and healthy life is alluring. Nearly 100 million Americans currently use anti-aging products and practices. Among these practices are special diets, such as "The 120-Year Diet" from Roy Walford (who died of Lou Gehrig's disease two months before his 80th birthday), plastic surgery, vitamins, mineral supplements, human growth hormones, and other hormones like melatonin, testosterone, pregnenolone, and estrogen. *Good Housekeeping* recently conducted laboratory tests on 90 anti-aging skin products alone. The editors used an advanced complexion analyzer and other scientific measurement tools to compile the "Anti-Aging Awards," announced in the October 2010 issue. The following issue included an article on how to "age-proof" your hair.

Most gerontologists assert that such remedies don't really slow the aging process. But what if we found a way to stay healthy and active well into our hundreds? What if it were possible to actually reverse the effects of aging—to heal arthritis, regain bone and muscle mass, and cure dementia by replenishing brain cells? With the promise of emerging genetic technologies, we may no longer need homespun remedies like port wine and olive oil. Nor will we need costly concoctions or impossibly expensive diets that only disguise age. Over the past decade, the search for the fountain of youth has moved from legend to laboratory.

For the first time, researchers have been able to slow aging in multi-cellular organisms and animals through selective breeding, dietary restriction, and genetic manipulation. One of the most promising avenues of aging research is the link between fasting and aging. Starve an animal, and it lives longer—it ages more slowly.

Molecular biologist Cynthia Kenyon, for example, has doubled the life span of the worm *C. elegans* by altering a single gene, the result of which mimics reduced food intake. "I wanted to be those worms!" said Kenyon. She exclaimed that even a moderate increase in life span would be like having the body of a 45-year-old at age 90. "If our company could make a pill, everyone would want it," she said. Her company hopes to make a pharmaceutical that mimics the genetic experiment in humans and allows consumers to enjoy the longevity benefits of fasting without having to drastically alter their diets. Moreover, that longer life may include health and vitality, assuaging fears that lengthening life would only prolong old age's attendant afflictions.

Other biologists have produced a six-fold increase in the life span of *C. elegans* by manipulating a pair of genes researchers believe control free-radical metabolism. Another promising avenue is the development of the enzyme telomerase. The enzyme enables cells to continue replicating beyond a finite boundary known as the Hayflick limit, since our bodies' cells (called somatic cells) die after reaching this limit. While many have expressed doubts concerning the viability of telomerase, a recent study has reignited hope. Last November, Harvard scientists announced that they had successfully reversed the signs of aging in elderly mice by using this therapy. Expecting to simply slow aging in the mice, lead researcher Ronald DePinho reported

*Exercise, technology, and diet  
help us live longer than ever.  
Should those who look to  
eternal life care?*  
By Todd T. W. Daly

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that “we saw a dramatic reversal—and that was unexpected.” Mice given telomerase actually generated new brain tissue and rejuvenated other aged bodily tissues, and recovered the physiological characteristics of younger mice. While it is still not clear whether this therapy will extend the lifespan of mice or simply enable them to live healthier into old age, such discoveries increase the hope that this technique can be applied to humans. Researcher Michael Fossel believes telomerase therapy will be widely available for life extension by 2015.

Medical success stories like these have captured the attention of aging baby boomers and venture capitalists alike, spawning life-extension organizations like the Methuselah Foundation, Centagenetix, and Elixir Pharmaceuticals. Elixir, for example, identifies “longevity genes” that it hopes will yield drugs to slow aging and reduce the disease and disability that accompany it. The University of Connecticut has given Elixir’s researchers an exclusive license to patent applications related to Stephen L. Helfand’s work. (Helfand has identified a gene known as Indy—the “I’m Not Dead Yet” gene—that doubled the life span of fruit flies.)

A healthy life span that extends beyond the Bible’s “threescore years and ten” (Ps. 90:10, KJV) is an enormously attractive prospect, particularly for a culture obsessed with youth and fearful of death. And it’s not just the broader culture that seems to want to stave off death. A fair number of Christians are fascinated by the prospect.

In 2009, Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network aired a program entitled “Anti-Aging ‘Secrets’ Revealed.” It featured Harry Lodge’s bestseller *Younger Next Year*, which discusses how certain lifestyle choices promote cellular growth. A more recent CBN article discussed how Christians can “beat the clock without needles, surgery, or spending much money.” It revealed tips from Doris J. Day, “one of America’s top beauty doctors,” who works primarily with Hollywood stars.

Extending life past current biological limits would have enormous social, political, economical, and ecological ramifications. Such treatments would introduce a host of moral questions, including whether the pursuit of longevity is appropriate when millions of children still don’t have access to basic immunizations. Despite these unseen and complicated issues, most anti-aging researchers embrace a technological determinism, says Steven Austad, biologist and author of *Why We Age*: “If science uncovers therapies that can do it, those therapies will be employed. This is one genie that has no chance of being put back in the bottle.”

The more fundamental question is whether human aging is a malady in need of a cure. Should we

treat aging as a disease? Is there anything wrong with hoping to live to age 150? And, particularly for Christians, is it wrong to want to live past threescore years and ten?

### PROLONGING ONE’S DAYS

Scripture suggests it is not wrong to want a long life. The Old Testament describes the “prolonging of one’s days” as a reward for obedience (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:33; Prov. 3:1–2). Conversely, the dwindling length of human life in the first few chapters of Genesis suggests that wickedness shortens life (e.g., Gen. 6:3). Indeed, the wicked will not live out half their days (Ps. 55:23). However, the Bible also reminds us that wisdom can prolong one’s limited life span (Prov. 9:11). Either way, the writer of Ecclesiastes laments that the wise and foolish alike must die (2:16).

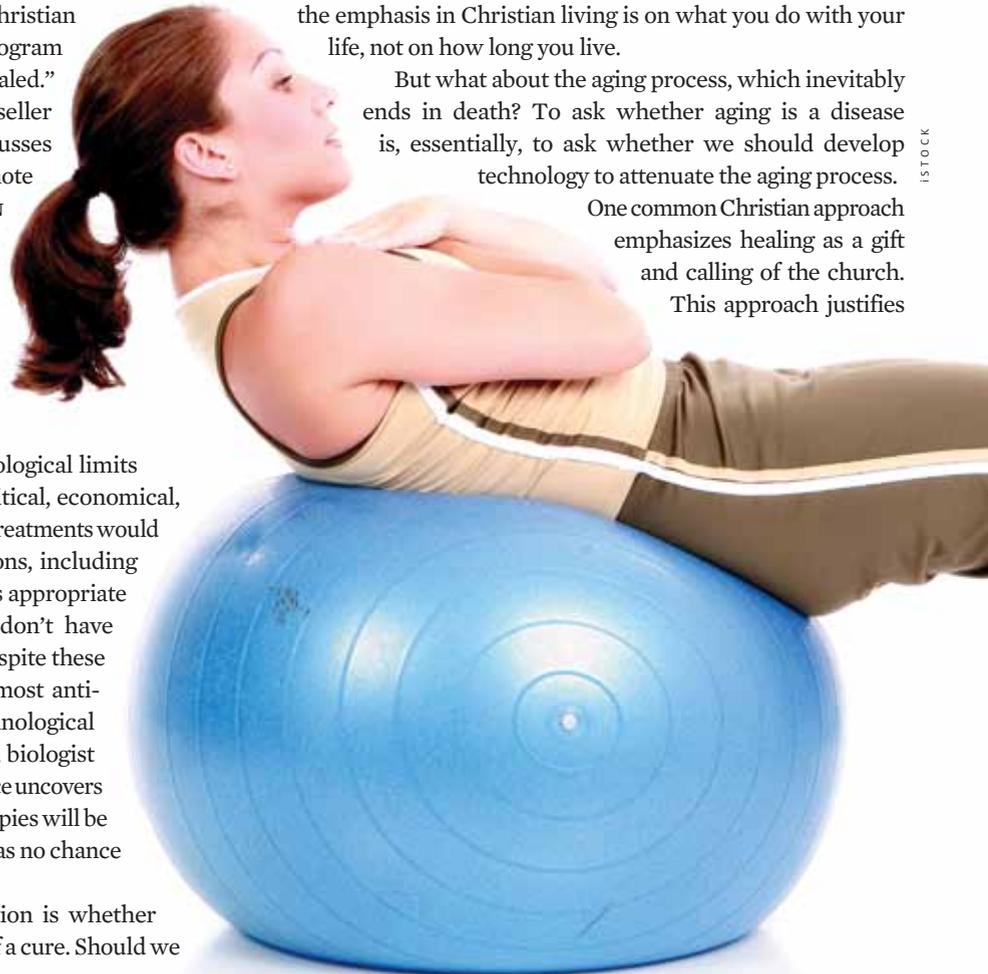
The New Testament shows that the teachings and resurrection of Jesus relativize the significance of one’s life span. Worrying won’t lengthen life by even a single hour, says Jesus (Matt. 6:27). Paul echoes this when he proclaims that “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Yet Jesus’ ministry included extending others’ lives by healing the sick and bringing the dead back to life (Luke 7:14–15; 8:52–55; John 11:38–43). Thus, Jesus confronts us as one who sought to undo life-shortening disease, but who also conquered death by succumbing to it.

Biblically speaking, while God is the giver of life, he does not indicate a normative life span. Nor does he guarantee that an obedient life will be a long one. Moreover, in light of Christ, the emphasis in Christian living is on what you do with your life, not on how long you live.

But what about the aging process, which inevitably ends in death? To ask whether aging is a disease is, essentially, to ask whether we should develop technology to attenuate the aging process.

One common Christian approach emphasizes healing as a gift and calling of the church.

This approach justifies



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using technology to overcome the deleterious consequences of the Fall (Gen. 3). One might conclude that Christians have theological warrant for waging an all-out technological battle against death and aging in hopes of regaining Methuselah-like longevity (Gen. 5:21–27). Augustine famously proclaimed that Adam was able not to die before sin, and unable not to die after. Yet it would be hasty to assume that Adam and Eve did not *age* before they sinned. Augustine noted in *City of God* that while Adam suffered no bodily corruption before the Fall, he could eat from the Tree of Life, “lest age decay him.”

That aging itself may be part of God’s plan for creation gains support when we consider Jesus Christ, God in human

## ***Should we treat aging as a disease? Is there anything wrong with hoping to live to age 150? And, particularly for Christians, is it wrong to want to live past threescore years and ten?***

flesh. Theologian Karl Barth argued that we cannot discern human nature from science, philosophy, or the social sciences. Rather, we find what it means to be human in Jesus as attested in Scripture. That Jesus ate and drank and aged indicates that it is good and fitting for us to be temporal, finite creatures. We do well to remember that Christians look forward to a bodily resurrection after death, made secure by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Longevity is not an absolute good.

It might appear, then, that the Christian faith has no vested interest in greatly extending healthy lives by slowing human aging. But that conclusion would be too simple. In fact, we find the deepest insights into the relationship between aging and our eventual resurrection in the writings of the early church fathers.

### **WISDOM FROM THE DESERT**

In *On the Incarnation*, the 4th-century bishop Athanasius describes Adam’s original state as one in which his soul was submitted to God. Thus, his body was perfectly submitted to his soul. Adam’s body was always tending toward decay, but his soul slowed aging so long as his soul was submitted to God. However, when Adam sinned by turning his attention away from God to material creation, his body and soul were thrown into disorder. His bodily desires began to rule his soul. This brought God’s pronouncement of death, and hastened the decay of Adam’s body. It’s this condition, said Athanasius, that Jesus

Christ, the incarnate Word, came to rectify.

Based in part on 2 Peter 1:4, which speaks of our participation in the divine nature, Athanasius repeats a well-known formula: “Christ was made man that we might be made God.” Athanasius argued that part of this transformation involves the human body. He did not blur the distinction between God and the human creature. Christians hold to the promise that one day we will be like Christ (1 John 3:2). Athanasius, like many in his day, was suspicious of the material and favored the spiritual. Still, he affirmed that the way to redemption, opened up by the Incarnation of Christ, begins by attending to the body.

For Athanasius, the best example of this transformation was the desert ascetic Saint Antony. Antony displayed powers over disease, demons, and, seemingly, death itself. Athanasius especially noted Antony’s ability to restore the proper order of body and soul. Antony did so, says Athanasius, by fasting, which restores the soul as rightful leader of the body. Antony thereby regained some of that bodily integrity and resistance to aging found in the Garden of Eden. Athanasius notes that Antony lived to 105, many of those years in the harsh conditions of North Africa’s deserts.

Athanasius is not alone. Many early Christian thinkers believed that the body could be effectively slowed down by fasting, thereby putting on a little of the incorruptibility enjoyed by Adam. But Athanasius also realized that any discussion of a return to Paradise must be balanced by the promise of a future resurrection body. Only Christ can clothe us with immortality. Again, longevity has its limits.

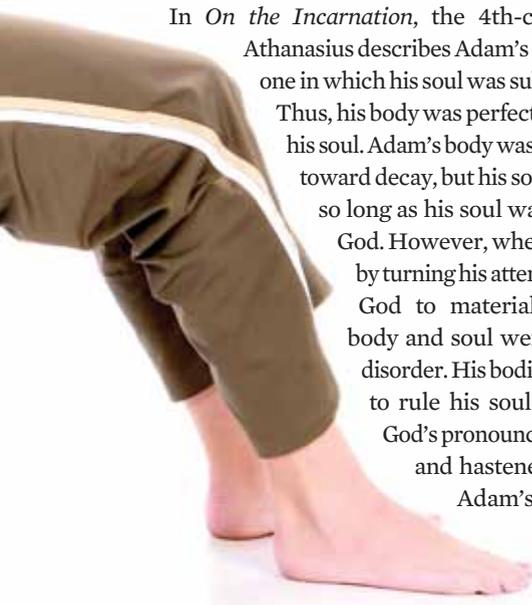
For the desert fathers, the goal of fasting was not to live longer. Rather, it was a crucial first step in submitting the body to the soul. This, in turn, brought the soul into submission to God. Only after one had effectively quieted the impulses of one’s body could one most effectively begin to till up the hardened soil of one’s heart. Fasting has a way of laying bare our ultimate commitments, of helping us see the things that so easily entangle us.

For the early church, then, fasting was a way to experience the freedom Christ has given us. In particular, this meant freedom from the fear of death, freedom to enjoy the presence of God, and freedom to love others. Indeed, Jesus himself practiced a lengthy fast at the beginning of his public ministry, and assumed that fasting was an integral part of his disciples’ lives (Matt. 6:16–18).

Thus, while Athanasius recognized that slowing down the aging process was possible, it was never the primary goal. He always subsumed it under the broader Christian discipleship project. Bodily practices were an entry point into the transformation of one’s soul, and intricately involved in the development of the whole person.

### **RADICALLY DIFFERENT NARRATIVES**

The point is not that the desert fathers recognized a link between fasting and aging well before it was “discovered” by scientists. Still less is this essay an argument to pursue life extension through the more “natural” means of fasting. But it is clear that behind these competing visions of longevity lie divergent notions of flourishing and what it means to





have—indeed, to be—a human body.

The modern biomedical project is fueled by the idea that our bodies are morally neutral. They are subject to the whims of our will, profoundly shaped by the liberal understanding of freedom as freedom from limitations—hence, the unquestioned pursuit of technology to slow or eliminate the aging process.

For example, in *The Quest for Immortality*, researchers S.

**Current attempts to extend life have confused the Tree of Knowledge for the Tree of Life, from which we have been cut off. But life has come to us through another tree—the Cross—through which death has not been eliminated but conquered.**

Jay Olshansky and Bruce A. Carnes assert that the quest has moved from folklore to legend to a frenetic scientific search for biochemical keys that will unlock the secrets of aging. They believe that some of these chemical compounds will probably be available during the lifetime of today’s younger generation.

That some researchers are trying to produce a pill that mimics fasting without requiring fasting illustrates how the modern world has disconnected body and soul. The assumption is that a restriction in food intake will reduce one’s quality of life. Thus the body has little formative role in the development of one’s character. The body is merely a myriad of genetic pathways subject to our technological control.

As ethicist Joel James Shuman of King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, rightly notes, contemporary bioethics “has tended to accept uncritically the biomedical view that the body is a largely passive object . . . irrelevant

to the autonomously rational decision making process that is understood to be the sine qua non of modern morality.”

In light of the Christian narrative, current attempts to extend life have confused the Tree of Knowledge for the Tree of Life, from which we have been cut off. But life has come to us through another tree—the Cross—through which death has not been eliminated but conquered.

Indeed, ethicist Oliver O’Donovan of New College in Edinburgh says that Christ’s incarnation, death, resurrection, and exaltation serve to vindicate the created order. This both underscores the goodness of our embodied finitude this side of eternity, as well as provides a picture of our future bodily existence in Christ’s presence. As Brent Waters observes in *The Mortal Flesh: Incarnation and Bioethics*, “It is this eschatological hope that enables Christians to consent to finite limitations, for through the gift of the Spirit, they have received the freedom to obey the constraints of their finitude, because these limitations have already been vindicated, redeemed, and taken up into the eternal life of God.”

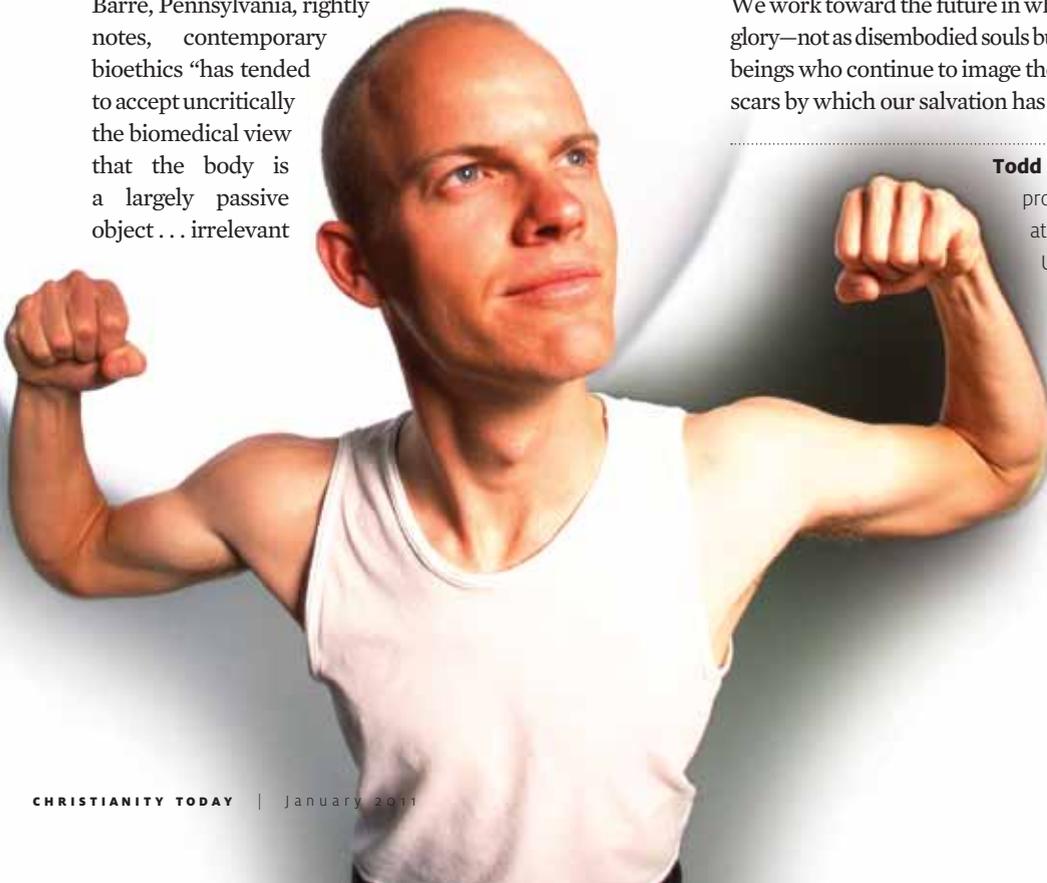
In light of this promise, Waters concludes, “Christians should also resist the rhetoric of treating aging as a disease to be prevented, treated, and cured.”

Christians who choose to engage in regular fasting, and thereby increase the chances for an extended life, might, paradoxically, become the kind of people for whom an extended life is no longer a driving concern. We subsume the quest for a longer and healthier life under the greater goal of being formed in Christ’s image.

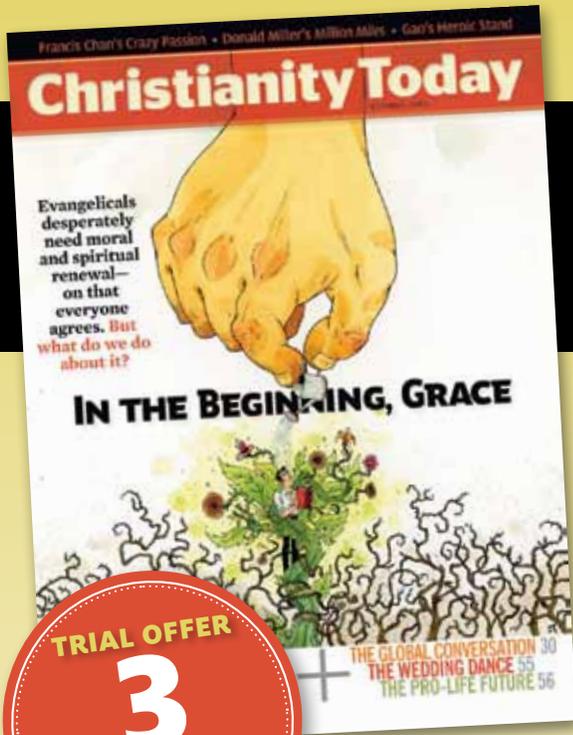
In another paradox, our spiritual formation is grounded in the Incarnation, which affirms the goodness of embodiment. We work toward the future in which we will behold God in his glory—not as disembodied souls but as living, glorified, embodied beings who continue to image the One who eternally bears the scars by which our salvation has been secured. ☩

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