

Supermarket Shooter Touted 'Great Replacement' Theory

The Wired Word for the Week of May 29, 2022

In the News

The 18-year-old man who killed 10 people and wounded three others in a Tops supermarket in Buffalo, New York, on May 14 was apparently motivated, at least in part, in reaction to what is sometimes called the "great replacement."

The great replacement theory, also sometimes called "white replacement," states that nonwhite individuals are being brought into the United States and other Western countries to "replace" white voters to achieve a political agenda. It has been pushed by people of all political stripes, including pro- and anti-illegal-immigration groups, white and anti-white supremacists, and others, including numerous politicians and media personalities.

In a manifesto reportedly written by the shooter, he described himself as a white supremacist and voiced his belief in the great replacement theory. According to the manifesto, the attacker specifically chose Buffalo because it "has the highest black population percentage ... and isn't that far away." The neighborhood containing the Tops supermarket is predominantly black. All 10 of the fatalities from the shooting were black people, as was one of the wounded.

The murderer lived in Pennsylvania, and drove three and a half hours to the supermarket from his hometown about 200 miles away. Police say he was in Buffalo a day before the shooting and had carried out a reconnaissance at the Tops supermarket.

The attack has been described as an act of domestic terrorism and a hate crime, and the incident is being investigated as racially motivated.

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the great replacement theory has roots in French nationalism books dating back to the early 1900s. But the French writer Renaud Camus is credited with bringing the theory into contemporary use through his 2011 book *Le Grand Remplacement* ("The Great Replacement"). Camus was himself influenced by another French author, Jean Raspail, whose 1973 novel, *The Camp of the Saints*, told a fictional tale of migrants banding together to take over France, the ADL said.

The 2020 census shows that the white population remained the largest ethnic group in the United States, with 204.3 million people identifying as white alone, out of 329.5 million total population -- about 62%. The white population decreased by 8.6% since 2010, but overall, 235.4 million people (about 71.4%) reported white alone or in combination with another group (i.e. multiracial).

Commenting on the great replacement notion, Samuel Goldman, writing in *The Week*, said, "Demographers predict that at some point around 2050, the non-white population of the U.S. will become larger than the white population. But whites would remain a significant plurality even if ethnic identification remains constant -- and there's reason to think that won't happen. Because the children of ethnic intermarriage often describe themselves as white regardless of their ancestry, predictions of white decline may turn out to be premature."

Following a hate-motivated mass killing in Charlottesville in August 2017, former presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama all came out forcefully against the extremists' rhetoric and the great replacement theory. In an October 2017 speech, George W. Bush stated, "Our identity as a nation, unlike other nations, is not determined by geography or ethnicity, by soil or blood ... This means that people of every

race, religion, and ethnicity can be fully and equally American. It means that bigotry or white supremacy in any form is blasphemy against the American creed."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[What Is the 'Great Replacement' and How Is It Tied to the Buffalo Shooting Suspect? *NPR*](#)

[The 'Great Replacement' Theory, Explained. *National Immigration Forum*](#)

['Replacement' Theories Are Wrong. Here's Why They Keep Coming Back. *The Week*](#)

[2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country. *United States Census Bureau*](#)

Applying the News Story

For purposes of discussion, it's helpful to recognize that the great replacement theory has two components:

- *One* is the claim that non-white individuals are being brought into the United States to "replace" white voters to achieve a political agenda. This assumes a) that non-white immigrants will vote a certain way and b) that this is a plot by a cabal of people working behind the scenes to make this "invasion" happen. Some believers in the theory say this cabal is made of up Jewish elites, which gives the theory an anti-Semitic tone.
- *The other* component is a fear by some white people that whites will eventually cease to be the majority group in the United States. As indicated in the "In the News" section above, there are predictions from demographers that this could happen around 2050.

It seems necessary to describe both components because some people in the mainstream of life who would quickly reject the first component -- perhaps seeing it as paranoid and delusional -- might nonetheless have some concern about what consequences might follow when white people are no longer the majority group.

Others, including many white people as well as others of differing races or ethnicities, have little concern about race or ethnicity, but do believe that immigration -- more precisely, illegal immigration -- is being encouraged by some as a means toward gaining or maintaining political power. It is not the race or ethnicity that is of concern, it is the use of illegal means to create people beholden to their purported benefactors.

We have asked TWW team members to answer this question individually: "How would you feel if the non-white population of the United States became larger than the white population?" See their answers in the "For Further Discussion" section below.

The Big Questions

1. How do you respond to the first component of the great replacement theory and why?
2. How do you respond to the second component of the great replacement theory and why?
3. What effect, if any, do population statistics have on your thinking about this matter? Why?
4. Regardless of your race, have you ever been "replaced"? (For example, have you ever been evicted from low-rent housing so that high-end condos could be built on the property?) How did you feel about that? What might the aboriginal people of the Americas have thought when the white peoples of Europe arrived? Is it possible they knew they and their customs and homes were to be "replaced"?
5. How do you think God wants us to respond to people of other races and cultures, no matter what group is in the majority?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Leviticus 19:33-34

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (No context needed.)

We've said "No context needed" for this verse since it is found in a list of unrelated commands, but in a larger sense, the context for this verse is the Old Testament itself, for this idea of treating the "alien" (immigrant) fairly is repeated often in those books (see, for example, Exodus 23:9; Numbers 15:15; Deuteronomy 24:14; Jeremiah 7:6; Ezekiel 22:29; Malachi 3:5).

Several of the verses repeat the idea that the Israelites should treat aliens fairly because the Israelites themselves had been aliens in the land of Egypt. It should be noted, however, that this instruction was not altered after the people of Israel were established in their own land -- that is, often the people hearing the command had not personally been aliens in Egypt; it was their ancestors who had been in Egypt. But the current generation was urged to identify with the experience of their ancestors.

There is no expression in any of these verses that the Israelites should fear the immigrants among them.

Questions: For people who intend to be guided by the Bible, how should this command play out today? Should we welcome immigrants? In what ways should we insist they are treated fairly? How does the matter of *illegal* immigration affect your thinking on this matter?

Psalms 27:1

*The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?*

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

(For context, read [Psalm 27](#).)

For some, demographic changes are cause for fear. But this psalm confronts fear head-on and naming them -- adversaries, evildoers, armies -- which creates other fears: despair, hopelessness, anger, bitterness. But the psalmist knows the names of the One who can overcome the fear: stronghold, shelter, savior, the gracious one, the good one, the Lord.

The psalmist speaks of how to access the help of the Lord, which is the remedy for fear: "Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path" (v. 11). Following that path leads the psalmist to say, "be strong, and let your heart take courage" (v. 14).

Questions: What are the problems with acting primarily in response to our fears? Is learning the Lord's way a quick process, and what does your answer to that suggest for you?

Job 42:12-13, 16

The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning. ... He also had seven sons and three daughters. ... After this Job lived one hundred and forty years and saw his children and his children's children, four generations. (For context, read [Job 42:10-17](#).)

In the first chapter of the book of Job, his children all die ([Job 1:18-19](#)). In the end, God gives him children again (see verses above). But they are not replacements for his original children because each one of those was a unique original and could not be replaced. The second set of children didn't "replace" the first set. Rather, those in the second set simply were God's gifts to Job, as were the children in the first set. The point is that in Christian and Jewish (and maybe others') theology, people are not replaceable.

Questions: Do you think Job ever "got over" the loss of his first children? Why or why not? How might that have affected his feelings regarding his second set of children?

Revelation 7:9

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. (For context, read [Revelation 7:9-17](#).)

This is from a vision John of Patmos (the author of Revelation) had of the multitude from every nation gathered around God's throne and before the Lamb (the resurrected Jesus). There's no word about ethnic identities but it must have been a great mix since the crowd included people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." What unites them is that they have "come out of the great ordeal [a time tribulation and suffering]; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14).

Questions: In what ways is the Christian faith common ground for people of different races, cultures and experiences? In what ways, if any, does it sometimes interfere with getting comfortable with people who are different from us?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss these replies from TWW team members to the question, "How would you feel if the non-white population of the United States became larger than the white population?"

A white female: The difficult part of this scenario is how much larger? If there was a fairly even balance of whites versus non-whites, I can't imagine feeling very different. If being white meant representing a very small part of the population, I am sure I would feel the natural effects of being a minority -- which may or may not be positive or negative. The real key to how I would feel as any minority would depend on the attitude toward me by the majority, which is the real issue with this topic.

If any group fears being "replaced," I think this is evidence that they are projecting their own feelings of superiority over other groups. If they didn't hold an attitude of supremacy, there would be no concern about an influx of others of any race.

A white male: I'm not sure that the "great replacement theory" is anything new. It has been touted, in some form, by many (not only Fox News) for years when they speak of the number of immigrants in the southwestern part of the country changing the demographics so that those states change from "red" to "blue."

There has been resentment and fears over the years as each new group of immigrants entered into the country. The Irish, Italians, Chinese, etc., each have faced backlash as they came to the country and took jobs and threatened the "norms." In many cases those immigrants eventually were accepted. The fears were that the new immigrants would overwhelm the system and change the "norms" rather than accepting the already established norms.

I'm not sure that I care about the skin color or majority of the country as much as the heart and beliefs of the country. Do we believe in similar things or are the new immigrants trying to transform the country with different beliefs?

A white female: I grew up in a mostly white city neighborhood, in a rooming house my parents owned near a major university. We rented rooms to people from over 160 nations. The multicultural experience was incredibly enriching for us, but was certainly an anomaly among white kids I grew up with. There were limited opportunities to interact with blacks, who lived, worked, and went to school mostly on the other side of town.

Back in the early 1980s, my husband and I had one year of seminary training in Chicago, during which time we lived in a South Side apartment infested with mice and roaches. We were the only whites on the block, except for one elderly white woman who had lived there all her life and who refused to move. All our neighbors were black. We lived there for a year, and I can't say I ever really got to know our neighbors. We'd hear gunfire outside the apartment at night and duck for cover. It was the first time I ever lived in an area where we were in the

minority. Everyone kept their doors locked, but I had a lot of fear. How much of it was race-related, and how much was due to living in a high-crime neighborhood with people we didn't know, it's hard to say. It was probably both.

Later, we lived in a mixed neighborhood in another city with whites, blacks, Hispanics and dark-skinned Muslims from Africa. I offered a children's Bible club in our house, which was attended by children of every color and religious background. We also joined a predominantly African-American church, which was a place of great blessing and healing for me. Now we live in a mostly white part of the country, and I miss having interactions with people of color. I have some precious relationships with people whose life experiences are very different from mine, but mostly I have to connect with them online, as in-person encounters are less available to me.

If I woke up tomorrow and found that I was surrounded by people who didn't look like me, I think I'd have a flood of emotions, mostly positive, happy, cheerful, but I imagine I'd have some anxiety, too. Would we like each other? Would we get along? I'd be committed to do my part to be a good neighbor, and assume most people from other life experiences would also do the same.

A black male: In 2005, I was assigned to the Miami Field Office of our agency. I am an African-American male and my wife is a European-American female; our oldest son, the only son at that time, has an appearance such that he is often mistaken for Latino, Arab or Creole. I speak Spanish, fluently, such that people often think me to be Dominican or another Latino islander.

In Miami, I smiled at jokes I overheard and was often greeted in Spanish. Suddenly, within the continental United States, I became a part of the demographic majority ... by perception ... in a very different way. In some cities in which I am perceived and understood to be a part of the African-American majority, I am treated differently. In those realms, and that of Miami, I felt more "at home." That is to say that I did not feel as if I were an outsider. Conversely, my wife, being "white" and (at that time) non-Spanish speaking, was quite frustrated and felt as if she were in the minority for the first time in her life. This experience was one that I also heard of from other white, non-Spanish speakers in the office. I found this very interesting that the tables were turned, by perception, for me; however, I know that many white Americans choose to not move into communities or neighborhoods where black Americans are in the majority.

Regarding the direction of the lesson: I see it as an opportunity to delve into how we should treat our neighbors as Christians and how fears may control us.

A white male: I'm sure my views on the great replacement theory reflect my unique circumstances.

I grew up in a town that, with one exception of a black family with two branches, was all white. And there was only one Jewish family (the father was my father's physician and one of the daughters was then -- and remains today -- one of my sister's closest friends). In my boyhood in the late 1940s and '50s, that town, Woodstock, Illinois, northwest of Chicago, had a population in the 7,000-10,000 range. Today the population exceeds 25,000 and includes many people of color, mostly Hispanics.

When I was 11 years old, my family moved to India for two years. My dad was part of a University of Illinois agriculture team there. At first I was in boarding school in the Himalayan foothills -- Woodstock School, in fact, a strange naming coincidence -- attended mostly by American missionary children. I wasn't a missionary child and paid dearly for that, starting with being harassed for showing up with several new pairs of socks. Later, I left that school and moved to where my parents lived in Allahabad, where I attended a school in which I was the only American. I also paid for that in various ways. Children can be cruel.

Through that and many other experiences I came to confront white supremacy, which I eventually began to notice was buried deep in our nation's culture and institutions. One thing that wouldn't let me ignore all of that was that new members of my extended family began to share their experiences. By new members I mean the people who married into the families my three sisters and I created. Within those families today you will find people whose roots are Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean and black. When enough members of this family gather we look like the U.N. Security Council on a picnic.

Far from fearing being a replaced white person, I look forward to more racial and ethnic diversity in our population because I know how it can enrich us in so many ways.

A white female: I grew up in a town where redlining was routine -- black families lived in one part of town, everyone else another (and everyone included people of all faiths and cultures since two large Fortune 50 companies were based in the area). Redlining stopped when I was in my early teen years. The public schools were integrated so I was always in mixed company even if the majority was white.

From ages 24 to 63 I lived in many larger cities: San Francisco, Boston, Atlanta, Toronto, Chicago, San Antonio, Miami Beach. Until I moved to Miami, every city seemed pretty diverse and everyone -- for the most part -- melded. In Miami I found a very classist, racist environment that, to me, seemed to stem from the dominant Hispanic majority. Skin tone, accent, country of origin all became part of how you were or were not valued by others, and it shifted depending upon the skin tone/accent/country of origin of the person making the observation. I am very white with blonde hair and green eyes, so never mistaken for Hispanic. I found living in that environment very telling and was one reason I chose to move away.

Now I am back near where I grew up but closer to rural than city and it is very white. I have been visiting various churches over the last 6 weeks or so and am struggling to find where I fit since I would like a rich and diverse group. I would feel better if more people did not look like me, and had other world and life experience to share.

An Hispanic male: I identify as Hispanic, which means nothing racially. We are a mixture of European and Native Americans, with a sprinkling of many other groups mixed in.

I suppose if anyone has a reason to cite replacement theory it would be the Native Americans who were largely replaced by European-Americans, although, to be fair, there is some reason to think that other humans might have been there before some of my ancestors crossed over from Asia on the Bering Strait land bridge. Replacement theory requires some remythologizing about the intelligence and lifestyles of the Native Americans. Anyone who has hiked around Chaco Canyon and stood amid the magnificent ruins that are aligned to astronomical events that might occur once in the lifetime of the average human being, and which therefore reflect sophisticated scientific knowledge of astronomy, architecture and construction realizes that the white people replacing others who occupied this continent required some mental and biblical gymnastics to justify it.

When we last took a photo of the eight siblings in my family before the first of us died back in 2020, you could see we are different colors. My twin sisters were nicknamed Chocolate and Vanilla after their birth because of the stark difference in skin color. The paternal line of our family came from the military officer class in Mexico, who were largely Spaniard and fair skinned, and crossed the border in 1910 because they were being asked to kill their own people during the Revolution. The maternal side is much darker, questions of race are meaningless. (By the way, one of my brothers had a DNA test. Some of our ancestry is Asian -- that whole Bering Strait thing I mentioned -- and some is Jewish, which is because of the Sephardic Jews kicked out of Spain in 1492, who of course actually remained and continued to interbreed, which is what humans do.

According to Adam Rutherford (*A Brief History of Everyone Who Has Ever Lived*) there are very few pockets of so-called "pure" racial groups because of the propensity of humans to fall in together at the slightest provocation. The idea of a particular race becomes less and less meaningful, if it ever had any meaning.

We don't have to be the same to be part of the same family of faith, and we see that clearly in the New Testament, where multicultural churches have to work extra hard to find a path forward, just like blended families. Evidently God thinks this sort of work is worthwhile because in Revelation 7 we're all in this together. At the end of the book the leaves of the trees in the city are for the healing of the nations -- not for their eradication -- because we are one people together, while authentically remaining who we are. The kings of the world can enter the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, (oddly enough after the final judgment) because what binds us together is the recognition that it is Jesus who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This seditious title, which got Jesus crucified, brings us together as one people.

With regard to the question -- I won't be bothered when the non-white population of the United States outnumbers the white population, although I'll be in my 90s by then if I make it so far. It will be like living in Los Angeles, or going to one of my family's picnics. At that point most of us will be mature enough to realize we're just people, and it's not a big deal.

Remember, white itself is a tricky definition. Benjamin Franklin objected to the arrival of Germans to the colonies because they were brown. Anglo-Saxon Americans objected to the Irish, and many European-Americans objected to Italians and Slavic populations -- and of course everyone hated the Jews. So there's white and white-

sort-of, depending. The racists tend to tightly define what they consider white anyway. I think everyone's going to be happier when we're all of us, unique, rich in heritage, living together.

A white male: In a church I pastored, I discovered a man who had recently joined the church relocated from his pew to a different section of the sanctuary. I inquired and was stunned by his wife's response, "Roger had felt displaced by a family of black people."

I prayed and asked God to provide a teachable moment for Roger, the church and myself. I also wanted to de-escalate the imminent struggle in the church's mission field, i.e., a community transitioning from a predominantly white culture and to find a message of unity despite racial prejudice and xenophobia in the community.

I wish I could say that there is a magic formula to heal all fears and create unity, however. In my follow-up conversation with Roger, I shared my concern for his actions. I noted his countenance was changed when he learned she was a college professor.

He admitted his prejudice was a product of his past, his experiences from his career associated race with lower economic levels. He had heard family and friends opine that if a neighborhood transitioned ethnically it would typically increase in crime rates and decrease in property values.

Roger battled through some of that racism. He was convicted by his wrong judgment, his wife's pure and gentle spirit and even getting called out by the pastor.

I am often reminded that xenophobia is driven by two false assumptions: 1) The past 'securities' of a dominant demographic are always better than the potential instability of a new unknown culture. And 2) People who look different are always poorer, i.e., have less financial worth.

It makes me wonder how much of our culture's prejudice is xenophobia and how much is driven by fears of economic differences.

Regarding the question: I would find spiritual fulfillment in the transition of a white- dominant culture to a welcoming melting pot of other ethnicities. I pray that earth might begin to look like the experience in heaven of every tribe, people, language and nation assembled in worship around the throne as described by John in Revelation 7:9.

I'm reminded of the rhyme that has lost its original author. The first part goes ...

"To live above with saints we love, that will be all glory ..."

On the other hand, I would need to secure many of my worldly insecurities around challenges and changes for an unknown culture shift in this world. The conclusion of the anonymous poet is ...

"... But to live below with those we know, that's quite a different story."

Declines to state race or sex: Regarding the question "How would you feel if the non-white population of the United States became larger than the white population?" my response is that race is immaterial. What is important is the political ideology of the people involved. If immigrants (and native-born) embrace the political ideology of classical liberalism -- individual liberty protected by the government under the rule of law -- then great. If they reject that for some sort of authoritarianism or elitism or other such philosophy, then there's a problem.

That said, I find the current obsession seeking to divide people based upon race and other irrelevant factors to be of great concern. This is especially true when race is made a component of a person's worth (e.g., intersectionality theories) or when a person is held to be victim or oppressor solely upon race or ethnicity (e.g., various offshoots of critical race theory).

While these racist beliefs are of concern, they are only part of a greater concern: the replacement of government preservation of human rights under the rule of law. Whether these are being replaced by mob rule (e.g., the summer 2020 riots) or by a person who describes himself as "mild-moderate authoritarian left" (the racist behind the Buffalo attack) makes little difference: People should be treated as individuals, and not as members of a class.

2. Read and discuss the opinion piece "'Replacement' Theories Are Wrong. Here's Why They Keep Coming Back" in the links list above.

3. Respond to this, from TWW team member Bill Tammeus: "The only replacement theory that I have feared in my life has to do with my profession of journalism and the competence of its practitioners. Not too long into that career I began to notice that there were journalists fresh out of college who lacked a basic command of the primary tool of our craft -- the English language. The result is language in print, online and on the air that is flabby, erroneous and misleading at times -- along with some wonderfully inventive language. The worst language misinforms us and misleads us and perhaps has been a factor in the existence today of 'alternative facts' and the disasters to which that bifurcated reality has led our body politic."

4. Consider this information from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "Biblically speaking, much of what we consider race does not seem to be a factor in much of the ancient world. People were definitely aware of their social status -- high-born Romans had three names, slaves had designations like Lucky and Useful, and around first-century Palestine you had a name and might be identified by your parents or your village (Jesus of Nazareth, Mary of Magdala). Simon of Cyrene was a northern African from Libya, and therefore likely even darker than the average Palestinian, but because of high mortality rates you could be adopted into a high-born family and become high-born yourself without the aid of any DNA.

"The Christian experiment had a nice twist to it -- we all are adopted into Abraham's family, while retaining our prior cultural heritage as Greek, Romans and Celts (Galatians). The apostle Paul retained awareness of his tribal identity within his Jewish culture (Saul, a member of the Benjamite tribe -- although certainly by that time if anyone had DNA tests, they'd have discovered tribal identity was meaningless). Paul was arrested practicing his religious heritage, freeing some co-religionists from their 'Nazarite jail,' paying off their vows so they could shave (like NHL players they didn't shave during their own Stanley Cup Playoffs) and drink wine again. He was zealous for the need for Gentile Christians to retain their own customs and practices as followers of Jesus, newly adopted members of Abraham's family.

"Chronicles is an alternate history which redefines us as one human family. The story begins with Adam, reminding us of our common ancestry, and connecting people like Anani (an Elephantine Jew who was unlikely to be ethnic Israeli) into the family (see 1 Chronicles 3:24 -- the Elephantine Jews are named after the island on the Nile where they lived, serving as mercenaries for the Persians in the era after the destruction of the temple), and the Kenites, who are drawn into the genealogy as well (see 4:13).

"After the horrific murders at the end of Judges -- a Levite's concubine is gang-raped and murdered, and a tribe among the people is wiped out in retaliation, the other tribes ignore genetics altogether and replenish the tribe to guarantee its continued existence by allowing some of their women to be kidnapped from a festival and used to restore that tribe's population. This series of atrocities also shows there is concern for perpetuating an actual genotype."

5. Comment on this, from TWW team member Liz Antonson: "Replacement theory has been around for a long, long time! It is basically a scare tactic used by people who must deceive the populace in order to gain or maintain power. Think of historical examples of this replacement concept in the ancient cultures: Why did Nero blame the Jews for his errors? How often have the ethnic groups been scapegoated by the lie that the woes of a society are the fault of a designated people?

"What would Jesus, Paul, etc., have to say about this type of deception? this type of manipulation? this type of oppression?

6. Do you feel threatened by immigrants from other countries? Whether yes or no, explain your response.

Responding to the News

One way to respond would be to have your group members share their answers to the question "How would you feel if the non-white population of the United States became larger than the white population?" as TWW team members did above. (Our team feels that by sharing our answers, we enriched each other in the process.

If you know someone who subscribes to the great replacement theory, consider asking that person to explain how he or she came to buy into it. And just keep asking for more information about their conclusions. They may

finally feel heard and may be open to other views in response to your genuine openness. You should also remain genuinely open: There also is the possibility that they may convince you. Or you may all "agree to disagree."

Prayer

Help us, O Lord, to find some way to stop the epidemic of murdering others to satisfy the claims of some twisted logic or personal shortcoming. Be present with comfort with the families of victims of the supermarket shooting, and with help for the families of the victims of Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas.

Other News This Week

Research on Life Extension Raises Ethical Questions

The Wired Word for the Week of May 29, 2022

In the News

In the third part of a series on immortality that appeared recently on the John Templeton Foundation website, author Lorraine Boissoneault reviewed [*New Methuselahs: The Ethics of Life Extension*](#), by John K. Davis, Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Fullerton.

The Wired Word team member, Jim Berger, described meeting with Sir John Templeton in the late 1990s about the possibility of securing a grant to assist St. Andrew's Kirk in Nassau in hiring a youth director. "He was in his late 80s at the time," Berger wrote. "He did give us \$5,000 to get the work started. But Templeton said he was not interested in funding any more buildings. His greater interest was in prolonging life. He wanted to investigate how we could live longer."

According to [Statista](#), in 1860, life expectancy was only 39 years; in 1900 it was 48; in 1930 it was 59; in 1970 it was 70; in 1990 it was 75. Life expectancy in the United States for 2022 is 79 years. Some futurists predict that in the not-too-distant-future, a likely normal life expectancy will be 120-140 years of age.

Matt Kaeberlein, professor of pathology at the University of Washington and the co-director of the Dog Aging Project, researches how to prevent aging.

"Over the last 10 or 15 years, at least with lab animals, ... we can functionally reverse some signs of aging," Kaeberlein says. But that doesn't mean the animals can live forever. Using the immunosuppressive drug rapamycin, mice can gain "an increase in health and lifespan of up to 25 to 30 percent," but they still die in the end.

"It is an unavoidable fact of biology that all organisms die, whether by disease, disaster or simply old age," Boissoneault wrote. "Yet our species, *Homo sapiens*, seems to be the only creature blessed -- or cursed -- with the cognitive ability to understand our mortality. And thanks to our powerful intelligence, we're also the only beings to imagine and seek out death's opposite: immortality."

Whether or not "life extension -- slowing or halting human aging" -- is possible is only one piece of the puzzle Davis addresses in *New Methuselahs* (a term borrowed from the name of the man in the Bible with the longest lifespan on record -- 969 years, according to Genesis 5:27). Another concern Davis has deals with ethics.

If life extension becomes technologically, medically and scientifically possible, would it always be desirable? How would we ensure that access to life extension was available affordably and equitably to everyone? How might the pursuit of life extension impact issues of overpopulation and depletion of natural resources?

Humans have various ways of imagining the "continuation of the self beyond death," Boissoneault explained: "spiritual afterlives and reincarnation ... the Fountain of Youth ... elixirs of life ... procreation ... a digital self," or creating a legacy of value added to the human experiment.

People also engage in efforts to extend life that may seem less dramatic: using sunscreen to prevent skin cancer, or seat belts to protect ourselves in case of an accident, for example.

Multiple sources, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations, report that half the world population cannot access essential health services now. For them, survival is the issue. Life extension isn't even on their radar.

"The healthcare system already exacerbates inequality in lifespans," Boissoneault asserted. "It's not hard to imagine a world in which the ultra-rich have access to longevity treatments while others are left to die early."

Geographer Deondre Smiles, a professor at the University of Victoria and citizen of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, wonders why some billionaires are spending billions on research of life extension. "Why would you want to do that?" Smiles asks. "Is it to be able to experience new things or is it to enrich yourself further, have more time to accumulate wealth and exploit more people?"

Davis expresses concern that further population growth could cause irreversible damage to the environment. Smiles worries that we will not be able to manage "resource distribution."

"If we extend our lifespan at the expense of the environments around us, there would be nothing to enjoy," Smiles adds. What good would it do to pursue a longer lifespan if the planetary infrastructure required to sustain life on Earth collapses?

There are multiple barriers to life extension, let alone to defeating death and becoming immortal, according to Boissoneault. But some aspects of our lives may well outlive us: our digital imprint, for example.

"The emotional, social, financial and business impact of active digital immortality on relations, friends, colleagues and institutions remains an area that is under researched," write scholars Maggi Savin-Baden and David Burden.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[New Methuselahs: The Ethics of Life Extension. MIT Press](#)

[Pre-life, Afterlife, and the Drive for Immortality. John Templeton Foundation](#)

[Science-Fiction or Science Fact: Is Medical or Digital Immortality Within Our Grasp? John Templeton Foundation](#)

[Unlimited Life in a Limited World. John Templeton Foundation](#)

Applying the News Story

However long one lives, none of us can escape death. The Bible tells us, "it is appointed for mortals to die once and after that the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). There may be ways to delay our appointment, but we cannot escape the inevitable.

According to Genesis 5:27, Methuselah lived 969 years. No one else lived so long. We know nothing about the man beyond his longevity, but even he eventually died.

Long life did not continue, however. Soon God set a limit of 120 years for a human lifespan (Genesis 6:3), perhaps to limit the extent of sinful acts a person could do in one lifetime.

The psalmist speaks of a lifespan that has shrunk even further, to 70 or 80 years, and advises us to count our days, so that we may gain a wise heart (Psalm 90:9-12). Elsewhere the psalmist states that all the days that were formed for him were written in God's book, before they ever came to be (Psalm 139:16).

Here are some of the instructions given in the Bible regarding what people need to do if they want to live a long and satisfying life:

- Honor your father and your mother (Deuteronomy 5:16)
- Follow the path the LORD your God has commanded you (Deuteronomy 5:33)
- Fear the LORD your God all the days of your life and keep all his decrees and his commandments (Deuteronomy 6:1-2; Proverbs 10:27)
- Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit; depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it (Psalm 34:11-14)
- Live a righteous life (Proverbs 16:31)
- Cling to wisdom, follow upright teachers (Proverbs 3:1-2, 13-18; 4:10-13)

Following these instructions doesn't guarantee long life, but the Bible teaches us that those who live by these principles have chosen the way of wisdom and blessing.

Longevity of a mortal's life on Earth, however desirable, pales in comparison to resurrection to eternal life, as it is described in the Bible. [Revelation 12:10-12](#) speaks of those who conquer the accuser of believers "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for *they did not cling to life even in the face of death.*" Our faith teaches us that, as precious as physical life is, there is something worth even more, something for which we should even be prepared to die, just as Jesus did ([John 10:11-18](#); [15:13](#)).

The Big Questions

1. Would you want to live much longer than our current average lifespans? Why or why not? Under what circumstances might your answer be in the affirmative? In the negative?
2. If you were able to become immortal, what would you do with immortality?
3. What ethical issues might arise if people had the option of living on Earth forever?
4. How does the gospel of Jesus Christ address the problem of death?
5. If someone were to ask you to account for the hope of eternal life that is in you ([1 Peter 1:3](#), [3:15](#); [Titus 1:2](#), [3:7](#); [Hebrews 10:23](#)), what would you say?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

2 Kings 20:1-3, 21

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover." Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, "Remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart and have done what is good in your sight." Hezekiah wept bitterly. ... Hezekiah slept with his ancestors, and his son Manasseh succeeded him. (For context, read [2 Kings 20:1-7](#), [20-21](#); [2 Kings 21:1-18](#).)

Hezekiah, king of Judea, was distraught upon learning that he would soon die from his illness. So he prayed with tears for healing and a longer life. God granted him an additional 15 years, and also delivered Hezekiah and the

city of Jerusalem out of the hand of the king of Assyria. Hezekiah had the satisfaction of developing public waterworks for the city, and fathered a son, Manasseh, who ascended to the throne upon his father's death.

Sounds wonderful, right? The only problem is that Manasseh "did much evil in the sight of the LORD," promoting idolatry, consorting with sorcerers, abusing his own son, defiling the house of God, shedding "very much innocent blood," and undoing much of the good Hezekiah had accomplished in his lifetime.

"Manasseh misled [the people] to do more evil than the nations had done that the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel." As a consequence, God gave them into the hand of their enemies. If that wasn't bad enough, Manasseh reigned 55 years!

One could argue that it all began with Hezekiah's desire for a few more years on planet Earth. But he couldn't have foreseen the path his son would choose to take after he died.

Questions: Was Hezekiah wrong to want to live longer? Why or why not?

1 Kings 3:11-14

God said to him, "Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or for the life of your enemies but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you, and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life." (For context, read [1 Kings 3:3-14](#).)

When God invited Solomon to ask for whatever he wanted, Solomon pleased God because he did NOT ask for long life, or for other things people think are valuable, such as riches or revenge. Because Solomon chose wisely, God promised to give him both a wise and discerning mind, and blessings he did not ask for, including riches, honor and long life.

Questions: Why is wisdom more important than longevity? In what sense might riches, honor and long life be a natural outgrowth of living wisely, as well as a special added blessing from God?

Genesis 3:4, 22-23

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die." ... Then the Lord God said, "See, the humans have become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now they might reach out their hands and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever" -- therefore the Lord God sent them forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which they were taken. (For context, read [Genesis 3:1-7; 17-24](#).)

Revelation 22:1-2

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (For context, read [Revelation 22:1-5](#).)

The desire for immortality has been with us from the very beginning, according to the Genesis account of the Fall. When the serpent tempted the woman in the garden, he said if she disobeyed God and ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, she would NOT die.

Of course, he lied. And the result was death in all of its manifestations: loss of trust and love between God and humans, troubled relations among people, disconnection of people with the environment, and the actual physical cessation of life. God sent the man and woman out of the garden, guarding the way to the Tree of Life with cherubim and a flaming sword.

The good news is that God always intended that humans have access to the tree of eternal life. But if the man and woman had eaten of the tree while in a sinful state, they would have had to live forever with that sin. God had a different plan: to redeem humans from sin through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Lamb of God, so that when they partake of the fruit of the Tree of Life in the city of God described in Revelation 22, they may do so in a state of grace, having been forgiven and set free from sin and death.

Questions: What do you think it would be like to live forever without ever being able to escape the horrors and atrocities of sin? Would you want immortality in such a case?

John 11:25-27

Jesus said to [Martha], "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." (For context, read [John 11:17-44](#).)

After Jesus' friend Lazarus fell ill and died, people gathered to console the dead man's sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus and his disciples came as well. Martha expressed her belief that her brother would not have died if Jesus had been there. She also stated that she knew God would give Jesus whatever he asked for.

But Jesus pressed her further. He wanted to know whether she could comprehend the idea that even in death, those who believe in him will live and never die. That is a kind of immortality that defies the natural limits of human mortality.

Questions: How is it possible to die, and yet live and never die? Isn't that an oxymoron?

What is the nature of the life Jesus came to provide (see [John 10:10](#); [John 17:3](#); [Romans 6:23](#); [2 Corinthians 4:14-18](#); [1 John 3:14-16](#))?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss "The Appointment in Samarra," a story by W. Somerset Maugham, about a merchant in Baghdad whose servant returned from the marketplace in a panic. He described seeing Death make a threatening gesture toward him there, and begged his master for a horse, so that he might ride away to Samarra to avoid Death. The merchant obliged, and the servant fled away as fast as the horse could gallop. Then the merchant went to the marketplace, where he found Death standing in the crowd. The merchant inquired as to why Death had threatened his servant that morning. "It was not a threatening gesture," Death replied, "only an expression of surprise. I was astonished to see your servant in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."

2. Comment on one or more of these quotes:

- I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens. -- Filmmaker Woody Allen
- Don't live the same year 75 times and call it a life. -- Robin Sharma, best-selling Canadian author
- The quality, not the longevity, of one's life, is what is important. -- Civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr.

3. React to this: In Greek mythology, the human Tithonus, a prince of Troy, was the lover of Eos, goddess of the Dawn. Eos couldn't bear the thought of losing Tithonus to death, so she asked Zeus to make Tithonus immortal. The only problem was, she forgot to ask that he be granted eternal youth and health, so as Tithonus aged, his life became increasingly horrific and meaningless. In some versions of the story, Tithonus becomes a cicada, condemned to live forever, but pleading to be allowed to die.

4. Consider this, from *The Wired Word* team member, Bill Tammeus: "I don't want to live forever, but I wouldn't mind duplicating my Uncle Lawrence Tammeus, my late Dad's brother. A few weeks ago I attended a party in

Illinois to celebrate Lawrence's 100th birthday. Lawrence thinks he might make it to 110, given that he still lives unassisted with his soon-to-be-94-year-old bride on the family farm on which my Dad grew up outside Delavan, Illinois, still drives his green Corvette into town most mornings to have coffee with his buddies and still probably could arm-wrestle me down in about 12 seconds."

5. Medical care is a limited quantity: It is always rationed. Life extension treatments would be similarly rationed. What are some ways that such treatments could be rationed, and what are the consequences of these differences? Some people worry about overpopulation and depletion of natural resources, while others worry about a decline in population and insufficient efforts to obtain natural resources. How might life extension affect either of these views?

6. Fill in the blank: "You know you're growing old when ..."

7. Respond to this: The late John Denver wrote a song called "Poems, Prayers and Promises" containing this lyric:

I've been lately thinking about my life's time
All the things I've done and how it's been
And I can't help believin' in my own mind
I know I'm gonna hate to see it end. ...
The days they pass so quickly now
The nights are seldom long
Time around me whispers when it's cold
The changes somehow frighten me
Still I have to smile
It turns me on to think of growing old.

Responding to the News

Perhaps instead of asking ourselves, "How many years do I have left to live?" we might think about this question: "How may I best live whatever remaining time God gives me?"

Prayer Suggested by [1 Timothy 1:17](#); [6:12-16](#); [2 Timothy 1:8-10](#)

Eternal God, who was, and is, and is to come, empower us to take hold of the eternal life to which Christ called us, and to boldly testify as to its reality to anyone who asks the reason for the hope within us.

To the King of the ages, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, immortal, invisible, the only God, who dwells in unapproachable light, our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, to him be honor, glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.