



How Long Can You Live?

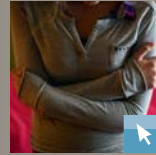


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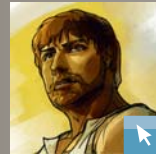


YOUNG PEOPLE ASK . . . **WHY DO I CUT MYSELF?**

“Every time I cut myself,” says a girl named Jerrine, “I became almost unaware of my surroundings, and I imagined that I wouldn’t have to deal with my problems.” Self-injury is a problem for many young people. Why? Is it just a fad? If you have resorted to this behavior, how can you get help?

(Look under BIBLE TEACHINGS > TEENAGERS)

CHILDREN



Read illustrated Bible stories. Use the activity pages to help your children improve their knowledge of Bible characters and moral principles.

(Look under BIBLE TEACHINGS > CHILDREN)

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UNITED STATES

Each day, more than 20 former members of the United States' armed forces commit suicide. Every month, some 950 veterans who are receiving care from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs attempt suicide.

CHINA

"Almost half of female migrant workers under 30 have become pregnant before marriage, a dramatic jump in the number of unwed [Chinese] mothers compared with only a generation ago," reports *China Daily*. Chinese society is also said to be "more open to . . . unwed couples living together."

ITALY

"The [Catholic] Church is weary, both in wealthy Europe and in America. Our culture has aged, our churches are big, our convents are empty and the bureaucracy of the Church has swollen, our rites and our vestments are pompous. . . . The Church is 200 years behind the times." —Interview with Catholic cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, published posthumously by *Corriere della Sera*.



GREECE

Greece is seeing a resurgence of malaria, a disease that was all but eradicated from the country in 1974. Economic woes and cuts in public health-care spending are blamed for the comeback.



INDIA

A survey showed that despite rapid social changes, 74 percent of the respondents still prefer arranged marriages over "love matches." An overwhelming 89 percent also prefer to live with their extended family instead of just their "nuclear family," composed of parents and children.



Soldiers: U.S. Marine Corps photo by Spc. Cory Grogan/Released; cardinal: AP Photo/Luca Bruno



When Your Teenager Self-Injures



THE CHALLENGE

You discover that your teenager has been intentionally injuring herself. ‘What does this mean?’ you wonder. ‘Is my daughter trying to kill herself?’

Most likely the answer is no. Nevertheless, if your teenager self-injures, she needs help. How can you provide it? First, consider what could be behind her troubling behavior.

Self-injury is the practice of compulsively harming oneself, whether by cutting, bruising, hitting, or another method.

Although in this article we refer to the self-injurer as a female, the principles discussed apply to both genders.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Is self-injury just a fad? Admittedly, some young people start to self-injure because they have heard that others do it. Even when that is the case, this is not a typical fad. What makes it different? The self-injurer usually acts in secret and is deeply ashamed of her habit. “I didn’t want anyone to know what I was doing,” says 20-year-old Celia.* “I hid my scars very well.”

Is self-injury simply a means to get attention? Some might use it that way. But the self-injurers we are discussing in this article tend to hide their practice and are not trying to use their cuts or bruises to impress anyone. Still, one former self-injurer says that she *wished* someone had noticed her injuries so that the matter could have been brought to light and she could have got help sooner.

Why, then, do people self-injure? The causes of self-injury are complex, but underneath it all the young person usually feels *emotional pain that is difficult to express in words*. In his book *Cutting*, mental health expert Steven Levenkron describes the self-injurer as “someone who has found that physical pain can be a cure for emotional pain.”

What if you blame yourself? Rather than dwell on the possible role of faulty parenting in your teenager’s self-injury, focus on the role of *good parenting* in her *recovery*.

* Names in this article have been changed.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Encourage your teenager to talk to you about what is troubling her. The following tips can help.

Console. If your teenager reveals to you that she self-injures, try not to react with shock or horror. Instead, speak in a calm and consoling manner.—*Bible principle: 1 Thessalonians 5:14.*

Ask nonthreatening questions. For instance, you could say: “I know you don’t always feel good about yourself. What frustrates you the most?” or “What can I do to help you when you feel anxious or depressed?” or “What do you most need from me in order for us to bridge the gap between us?” Listen to her replies without interrupting.—*Bible principle: James 1:19.*

The self-injurer usually feels emotional pain that is difficult to express in words

Help your teenager to see herself in a balanced light.

Since self-injurers often focus on their failings, perhaps you can encourage your teenager to recognize her positive traits. You might even suggest that she write down at least three things that she likes about herself. “Writing down my strengths helped me to see that I have good qualities,” says a young woman named Briana.*

Encourage your teenager to pray to Jehovah God. The Bible says: “Throw all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7) “I made an effort to pour out my feelings to Jehovah God,” says Lorena, 17, “especially when I was tempted to self-injure. It helped me to try that much harder to stop.”—*Bible principle: 1 Thessalonians 5:17.* ■

* Often, self-injury is a symptom of depression or another disorder. In such cases, medical help may be needed. *Awake!* does not endorse any particular approach. However, Christians should be sure that any treatment they pursue does not conflict with Bible principles.

KEY SCRIPTURES

“Speak consolingly to the depressed souls.”—1 Thessalonians 5:14.

“Be swift about hearing, slow about speaking.”—James 1:19.

“Pray incessantly.”—1 Thessalonians 5:17.

“I TOLD MY MOM”

“Some time after I stopped cutting myself, I told my mom. I thought she would yell at me, but she was supportive. In fact, she was sad that I felt as if I couldn’t talk to her about my problems. She wanted to make sure that I got better. I felt better after I told her. She gave me love, which was all I really wanted in the first place.”—Celia.

For more information, see the article “Young People Ask—Why Do I Cut Myself?” It is published on our Web site, www.jw.org
(Look under BIBLE TEACHINGS > TEENAGERS)





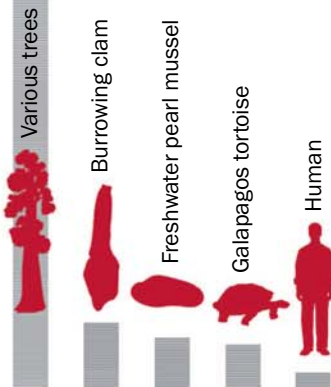
How Long Can You Live?

WHEN Harriet died in 2006, she was about 175 years old. Of course, Harriet was not a human. She was a Galapagos tortoise, and she lived at a zoo in Australia. Compared with us, Harriet had a very long life. But in comparison with other living things, her life span was not extraordinary. Consider some examples.

- The freshwater pearl mussel, say researchers in Finland, may live for 200 years.
- The burrowing clam (ocean quahog) often lives beyond 100 years and has even been reported to live more than 400 years.
- Various trees, such as the bristlecone pine, the giant sequoia, and some species of cypress and spruce, live for thousands of years.

Yet humans, who are generally considered to be at the apex of terrestrial life, do well to live for 80 or 90 years—despite our sometimes extraordinary efforts to extend life!

What do you think—is eight decades or so the best we can hope for? Or is there the possibility that we can live much longer? Many people hope that science and medical technology hold the key.



Can Science Help?

Science has contributed much to the fields of health and medical technology. “Fewer people [in the United States] die from infectious diseases or the complications of childbirth,” says *Scientific American* magazine. “Infant mortality is down by 75 percent since 1960.” But science has met with limited success in extending adult longevity. “Even after decades of

“Even after decades of research, aging largely remains a mystery”

research, aging largely remains a mystery,” says another edition of *Scientific American*. However, “evidence suggests that aging may occur when genetic programs for development go awry.” The article continues: “If aging is primarily a genetic process, conceivably it could one day be preventable.”

In their search for the underlying causes of aging, including age-related diseases, some scientists are exploring recent developments in a field of genetics called *epigenetics*. What is epigenetics?

Living cells contain genetic information, which is needed for the production of new cells. Much of this information is found in the genome, a term that refers to all the DNA in a cell. In recent times, however, scientists have delved deeper into another array of mechanisms within the cell—the *epigenome*, a word that can mean “above the genome.” Epigenetics is the study of this amazing group of mechanisms and their chemical reactions.

The molecules that make up the epigenome look nothing like DNA. Whereas

DNA resembles a twisted ladder, or double helix, the epigenome is essentially a system of chemical marks, or tags, that attach to DNA. What is the role of the epigenome? Like a conductor directing an orchestra, the epigenome directs the way genetic information in the DNA is expressed. The molecular tags turn sets of genes on or off in response to both the needs of the cell and environmental factors, such as diet, stress, and toxins. Recent discoveries involving the epigenome have caused a revolution in the biological sciences, one that links epigenetics with specific diseases and even aging.

“[Epigenetics is] implicated in diseases from schizophrenia to rheumatoid arthritis, and from cancer to chronic pain,” says epigenetics researcher Nessa Carey. And it “definitely has a role to play in aging.” Thus, research into epigenetics may lead to effective therapies for improving health, fighting disease—including cancer—and therefore extending life. At present, however, no major breakthroughs are on the horizon. “We’re still stuck with our old routine [for combating ageing],” says Carey, “lots of vegetables” and “plenty of exercise.”

Why, though, do humans go to so much trouble to extend life? Why do we want to live indefinitely? The British newspaper *The Times* asked: “Why this universal human obsession with cheating death, whether through immortality, resurrection, afterlife or reincarnation?” The answer, as we shall now see, sheds light on the real underlying cause of aging.

Why Do We Want to Live Forever?

For thousands of years, thinking people have wrestled with that question. Is there a logical, satisfying explanation—one that



Can You Live Healthier and Longer Even Now?

In a landmark study involving more than 1,500 people who were born about the year 1910, health scientists Howard S. Friedman and Leslie R. Martin claim that good indicators of longevity are conscientiousness and having a large number of social ties. “Conscientious people do more things to protect their health and engage in fewer activities that are risky,” say Friedman and Martin. “They are less likely to smoke, drink to excess, abuse drugs, or drive too fast. They are more likely to wear seat belts and follow doctors’ orders. They are not necessarily risk averse but they tend to be sensible in evaluating how far to push the envelope.”

In regard to social ties, those who lived longer “had large [social] networks and . . . helped others.” The adage “The good die early, and the bad die late,” crumbles under scientific scrutiny, say the authors. “Generally speaking . . . the bad die early, and the good do great.”

harmonizes with both our physical make-up and our natural desire to live forever? Millions of people would answer with a resounding yes! Why? In the Bible, they have found the most satisfying answers about human nature.

From the outset, the Bible plainly states that humans, while having some things in common with other creatures, are fundamentally different. For example, at Genesis 1:27, we read that God created humans in his image. How so? He gave us the capacity to display love, justice, and wisdom. And as the One who lives forever, God implanted in us the desire to live for-

ever. He “planted eternity in men’s hearts and minds,” says Ecclesiastes 3:11.—*The Amplified Bible*.

Physical evidence that humans were originally designed to live much longer than we do can be seen in the power of the brain, especially in its potential to learn. *The Encyclopedia of the Brain and Brain Disorders* states that the long-term memory capacity of the human brain “is virtually unlimited.” Why have this capacity if it were not meant to be used? Yes, in fundamental ways, humans reflect God’s original purpose for mankind. Then why do we grow old, suffer, and die?



Why We Grow Old and Die

The first man and woman had perfect bodies along with free will. Sadly, they misused that free will by rebelling against their Maker.* (Genesis 2:16, 17; 3:6-11) Their disobedience, or sin, caused them to have profound guilt and shame. It also resulted in damage to their bodies, triggering a slow, inexorable descent toward death. “The sting producing death is sin,” states 1 Corinthians 15:56.

In line with the physical laws of inheritance, all of Adam and Eve’s descendants acquired imperfection and the inclination to sin, or do what is wrong. Says Romans 5:12: “Through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men because they had all sinned.”

What can we conclude from the foregoing? This: The secret to endless life will never be found in a laboratory. Only God can undo the damage caused by sin. But will he? The Bible answers with another resounding yes!

“He Will . . . Swallow Up Death Forever”

God has already taken a major step toward removing sin and death. He sent Jesus Christ to give his life in our behalf. How can Jesus’ death help us? Jesus was born perfect and “committed no sin.” (1 Peter 2:22) Hence, he was entitled to endless, perfect life as a human. What did he do with his perfect life? He willingly gave it up to pay for our sins. Yes, Jesus gave his life “a ransom in exchange for many.” (Matthew 20:28) Soon,

that ransom will be fully applied in our behalf. What can that mean for you? Consider these scriptures:

- “God loved the world so much that he gave his only-begotten Son, in order that everyone exercising faith in him might not be destroyed but *have everlasting life*.”—John 3:16.
- “He will actually *swallow up death forever*, and the Sovereign Lord Jehovah will certainly wipe the tears from all faces.”—Isaiah 25:8.
- “As the last enemy, *death is to be brought to nothing*.”—1 Corinthians 15:26.
- “The tent of God is with mankind . . . And he will wipe out every tear from their eyes, and *death will be no more*.”—Revelation 21:3, 4.

How long can you live? The Bible’s answer is clear: *Humans can have the hope of living forever*—a hope that will be fulfilled after God cleanses the earth of all badness. (Psalm 37:28, 29) Jesus had that precious hope in mind when he said to a man impaled next to him: “You will be with me in Paradise.”—Luke 23:43.

Yes, the human desire to live forever is both reasonable and natural. God made us that way! Moreover, he will satisfy that desire. (Psalm 145:16) We must do our part, however. For instance, we need to build faith in God. “Without faith it is impossible to please [God] well, for he that approaches God must believe that he is and that he becomes the rewarder of those earnestly seeking him,” says Hebrews 11:6. Such faith is not credulity but is an intelligent conviction based on accurate Bible knowledge. (Hebrews 11:1) If you would like to gain that faith, please speak to Jehovah’s Witnesses locally or visit our Web site at www.jw.org. ■

* Adam and Eve’s rebellion raised serious moral issues that involve God. These issues, which explain God’s temporary toleration of wickedness, are discussed in the Bible study aid *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* Read it online at www.jw.org.



An Orthopedic Surgeon Explains Her Faith

Dr. Irène Hof Laurenceau practices orthopedic surgery in Switzerland. At one time she doubted God's existence. But some years later she came to the conclusion that God exists and that he is the Creator of life. *Awake!* asked her about her work and her faith.

What aroused your interest in science?

As a child, I was fascinated by nature. I grew up in Richterswil, a beautiful Swiss village on the shore of Lake Zurich. My parents and older siblings would take me for walks and tell me about the creatures and plants we saw along the way.

Why did you study orthopedic surgery?

For a short time, my father worked as an attendant in an

operating room at a local hospital. What he saw moved him to speak enthusiastically about surgery. His enthusiasm excited me so much that I later chose surgery as a profession. I specialized in orthopedic surgery because I like the mechanical aspects of it. Orthopedic surgeons have to think like an engineer in order to repair the bones, muscles, and tendons that enable us to move about.

Most of all, I enjoy seeing my patients' health improve.

I really like working closely with people.

Why did you doubt God's existence?

My doubts began in my youth, and two factors in particular influenced me. First, I discovered that certain religious instructors at church were immoral, and this disturbed me considerably. Second, at school, some of my biology teachers believed in evolution—a teaching I came to accept, especially when I went to a university.

Why did you accept evolution?

I believed my professors. Additionally, I thought that the similarity in anatomy between

Mutations could never produce something so brilliantly designed as the human knee

certain kinds of animals pointed to a common ancestry and supported the notion that genetic mutations lead to new species.

Yet, in time you changed your mind. Why?

A friend invited me to a meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses. I was impressed by the friendly congregation and the informative talks. Later, a pleasant lady from the congregation visited me, and I asked her, "How can I be sure that the Bible is true?"

She showed me Bible prophecies about many events that characterize our times. An example is Jesus' prophecy that the last days of the present world would be marked by international warfare, "great earthquakes," and rampant "pestilences and food shortages."¹ She also pointed out prophecies that foretold the social breakdown and increase in greed and other badness that we see so much of today.² Before long, I began to study the Bible in earnest and soon realized that its predictions *always* come true. I also began to reexamine my views on the origin of life.

Did your medical research help you to reason on the origin of life?

Yes. When I started studying the Bible, I was researching

knee surgery. Beginning in the late 1960's, scientists began to understand the knee's intricate mechanism more clearly. They found that our knee does not only bend on a single axis like a hinge. Rather, it both rolls and glides—an ingenious combination that gives the knee a greater range of movement, enabling us to walk, dance, skate, and do a host of other things.

For some 40 years, researchers have tried to design an artificial knee. But the complexity of the human knee makes it difficult to duplicate. Moreover, compared with our knee, artificial products have a relatively short life span. Even with improved materials at their disposal, those designers are pleased if their products last 20 years. Our knee, of course, is made of living cells that are constantly renewed. To me, the knee testifies, not to the blind processes of evolution, but to the wisdom of God.

What about mutations and the similarity in anatomy between certain species?

That similarity points to the same Designer. Moreover, mutations do not improve the designs in living organisms by el-

evating them to a higher kind. Rather, mutations tend to damage genes. Of course, it is possible that an accident can serve a beneficial purpose—such as when, say, a train crashes into a bridge and wrecks it, thus protecting the city from an invading army. But that accident did not improve the city. Likewise, mutations do not improve organisms. And they could never produce something so brilliantly designed as the human knee—not to mention other parts of the human body.

Why did you become one of Jehovah's Witnesses?

When I began to apply Bible principles, the quality of my life improved markedly. Additionally, in 2003, I went to an international convention of Jehovah's Witnesses and saw extraordinary family-like unity there, even among delegates who had never met one another before. That was love in action, and I wanted to be a part of it. ■

1. Luke 21:10, 11.

2. 2 Timothy 3:1-5.



Should You Believe in the Trinity?

More than two billion people profess to be Christian. Most belong to churches that teach the Trinity—the doctrine that the Father, the Son, and the holy spirit together form one God. How did the Trinity become an official doctrine? More important, is this teaching in harmony with the Bible?

THE Bible was completed in the first century C.E. Teachings that led to the development of the Trinity began to be officially formulated in 325 C.E.—more than two centuries later—at a council in the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor, now Iznik, Turkey. According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, the creed attributed to the Council of Nicaea set out the first official definition of ‘Christian orthodoxy,’ including the definition of God and Christ. Why, though, was it deemed necessary to define God and Christ centuries after the Bible was completed? Is the Bible unclear on these important topics?

IS JESUS GOD?

When Constantine became sole ruler of the Roman Empire, professed Christians

were divided over the relationship between God and Christ. Was Jesus God? Or was he created by God? To settle the matter, Constantine summoned church leaders

“To us there is but one God, the Father.”

—1 Corinthians 8:6, King James Version

to Nicaea, not because he sought religious truth, but because he did not want religion to divide his empire.

Constantine asked the bishops, who may have numbered into the hundreds, to come to a unanimous accord, but his request was in vain. He then proposed that the council adopt the ambiguous notion that Jesus was “of one substance” (*homoousios*) with the Father. This unbiblical Greek

philosophical term laid the foundation for the Trinity doctrine as later set forth in the church creeds. Indeed, by the end of the fourth century, the Trinity had essentially taken

the form it has today, including the so-called third part of the godhead, the holy spirit.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

Jesus said that “the true worshipers will worship the Father with . . . truth.” (John 4:23) That truth has been recorded in the Bible. (John 17:17) Does the Bible teach that the Father, the Son, and the holy spirit are three persons in one God?



QUICK FACTS:

- “The Nicene Creed is actually not the product of the First Council of Nicaea (325) . . . but of the First Council of Constantinople (381),” says *The New Westminster Dictionary of Church History*.
- “The Council of Nicaea in 325 stated the crucial formula for [the yet future Trinity] doctrine in its confession that the Son is ‘of the same substance . . . as the Father.’” —*Encyclopædia Britannica*.

The first Council of Nicaea (artist's impression) paved the way for the Trinity doctrine

© SuperStock

For one thing, the Bible does not mention the word “Trinity.” For another, Jesus never claimed to be equal to God. Instead, Jesus worshipped God. (Luke 22:41-44) A third line of evidence concerns Jesus’ relationship with his followers. Even after he was raised from the dead to the spirit realm, Jesus called his followers “my brothers.” (Matthew 28:10) Were they brothers of Almighty God? Of course not! But through their faith in Christ—God’s preeminent Son—they too became sons of the one Father. (Galatians 3:26) Compare some additional scriptures with the following statement from the creed attributed to the Council of Nicaea.

What the Nicene Creed says:

“We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . that is of the

substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.”

What the Bible says:

- “My Father is *greater* than I [Jesus].”—John 14:28.*
- “I [Jesus] ascend unto *my Father*, and your Father, and to *my God*, and your God.” —John 20:17.
- “To us there is but *one God*, the Father.”—1 Corinthians 8:6.
- “Blessed be *the God and Father* of our Lord Jesus Christ.” —1 Peter 1:3.
- “These things saith the Amen [Jesus], . . . the beginning of the *creation of God*.” —Revelation 3:14. # ■

* Italics ours. All the quotations in this section are from the *King James Version*.

The Bible study aid *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* includes these two lessons: “What Is the Truth About God?” and “Who Is Jesus Christ?” You may obtain a copy from Jehovah’s Witnesses or read it online at www.jw.org.

“The Christian Bible, including the New Testament, has no trinitarian statements or speculations concerning a trinitary deity.”—*Encyclopædia Britannica*.

“The doctrine of the trinity . . . is not a product of the earliest Christian period, and we do not find it carefully expressed before the end of the second century.”—*Library of Early Christianity—Gods and the One God*.

“In order to articulate the dogma of the Trinity, the [Catholic] Church had to develop her own terminology with the help of certain notions of philosophical origin.”—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*.



ALCOHOL

Is it wrong to drink alcoholic beverages?

*“Wine to make us happy,
olive oil to make us
cheerful, and bread
to give us strength.”*

—Psalm 104:15, “Good News
Translation.”

WHAT PEOPLE SAY In many homes, alcoholic beverages are virtually a staple taken with meals. In other homes, drinking is strongly disapproved of. Why the different viewpoints? People are influenced by various factors, such as culture, health concerns, and religion.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS The Bible condemns drunkenness and overindulgence but not the moderate consumption of alcohol. (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10) Indeed, from time immemorial, men and women of God drank wine, a beverage mentioned over two hundred times in the Bible. (Genesis 27:25) “Eat your food with rejoicing and drink your wine with a good heart,” says Ecclesiastes 9:7. Because wine contributes to a joyful spirit, it was usually served on festive occasions, such as wedding feasts. It was at such a feast that Jesus Christ performed his first miracle—turning water into “fine wine.” (John 2:1-11) Wine was also used for medicinal purposes.—Luke 10:34; 1 Timothy 5:23.



Does the Bible set limits on how much to drink?

WHY DOES IT MATTER? Each year, countless families suffer because one or both parents abuse alcohol. Excessive drinking also contributes to innumerable falls and other accidents, including road accidents. And in the long run, alcohol abuse can damage the brain, the heart, the liver, and the stomach.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS Moderation in both drinking and eating is a fundamental requirement of God. (Proverbs 23:20; 1 Timothy 3:2, 3, 8) The lack of self-control brings his disapproval. The Bible states: “Wine is a ridiculer, intoxicating liquor is boisterous, and everyone *going astray by it* is not wise.”—Proverbs 20:1.

One way that alcohol can lead the unwise astray is by eroding their moral fiber. Says Hosea 4:11: “Wine and sweet wine are what take away good motive.” A man named John learned this the hard way.* After an argument with his wife, he went to a hotel, drank too much, and committed adultery—deeds he later profoundly regretted and resolved never to repeat. Abuse of alcohol can harm us physically, morally, and spiritually, and the Bible states that drunkards will not get everlasting life.—1 Corinthians 6:9, 10.

* Name has been changed.

“[Do not be] enslaved to a lot of wine.”

—Titus 2:3.

When is drinking inappropriate?

WHY DOES IT MATTER? “Alcohol is a powerful drug,” says *World Book Encyclopedia*. Hence, there may be circumstances or times when even the moderate consumption of alcohol would be unwise.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS People often “walk right into [trouble]” because they drink at the wrong time. “For everything there is an appointed time,” the Bible says, including a time to stay away from alcohol. (Ecclesiastes 3:1) For example, a person may be legally too young to drink, he may be a recovering alcoholic, or he may be taking medication that does not interact well with alcohol. And for many people, the “appointed time” to abstain is before they go to work and while they are at work, especially if they operate potentially dangerous machinery. To be sure, wise people view life and health as precious gifts from God. (Psalm 36:9) We show our respect for those gifts when Bible principles guide our attitude toward alcohol. ■

“Sensible people will see trouble coming and avoid it, but an unthinking person will walk right into it and regret it later.”

—Proverbs 22:3, “Good News Translation.”



The Energy-Efficient Flight of the Wandering Albatross



© Minden Pictures/SuperStock

BIRDS that soar can stay airborne with minimum effort. The wandering albatross is an outstanding example. With a wingspan of 11 feet (3.4 m) and weighing nearly 20 pounds (8.5 kg), this bird can fly thousands of miles using very little energy! Its secret lies in both its anatomy and its soaring technique.

Consider: During flight, an albatross engages special tendons that lock its wings in place when fully extended, thus allowing the muscles to rest. The bird's other secret—how it soars hour after hour—involves its mastery of oceanic winds.

At sea, albatrosses climb, turn, and descend in continually repeated arcs—a maneuver that gives the birds enough momentum to compensate for that lost through drag. Only recently did scientists figure out how the birds are able to do this. Using high-resolution tracking devices and special computer software, they found that albatrosses gain the needed energy when they wheel from windward (into the wind) to leeward in the upper part of the flight curve. “The extraction of energy” is “smooth and continuous,” state the scientists. The result? The bird can soar for hours on end without a single flap of its wings!

These insights may help engineers design aerial vehicles that are more fuel efficient, perhaps even using engineless propulsion.

What do you think? Did the energy-efficient flight of the albatross, as well as its specialized anatomy, come about by evolution? Or was it designed? ■

