

what it's all about . . .

Maintaining the commandments of God and keeping the faith of Jesus in a world that will not survive

it's about the survivors

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The survivor phenomenon has been a popular feature of mass entertainment in the new millennium. This phenomenon is the hallmark not only of the "Survivor" television series, but also of the "Big Brother" series and the quiz show "The Weakest Link". In each show, contestant after contestant is voted off the team and the last person left standing takes the prize. Contestants have to work together, but they also have to know which of their fellow team members to shunt and when. Viewers become glued to their television sets wondering who will survive and how.

Our absorption in the survivor phenomenon is a symptom of the anxiety we feel about our own survival and of the tension that exists between our need for community support and our innate selfishness. But the "survivor challenge" is not something new. It has been around since the Fall.

The Remnant as Survivors

The biblical perspective is clear. Who will survive? The remnant. How will it survive? By God's grace.

In the Bible, remnant language is used in two contexts: that of surviving a physical threat like a war, and that of surviving a spiritual threat like apostasy. It is the latter context that is of significance.

Spiritual survival and physical survival are distinct but related issues. In the flood and at the Red Sea, God's people survived physically and their enemies were destroyed. Yet it is not always so. In the first recorded conflict outside the garden, the righteous Abel died and the wicked Cain survived. When judgment strikes, those who survive are not necessarily greater sinners than those who fall (Luke 13:1-5). That there are any survivors at all is a sheer act of grace (Isa 1:7-9). Yet through each calamity, God's purpose stands to create a purified and holy community (Isa 1:21-26). In the end, all the wicked will be destroyed and the righteous of all ages will be ransomed from the grave. Then spiritual survival and physical survival will be inseparable.

A Common Misconception

It is sometimes believed that the remnant emerges only at the end of history. However, the first remnant story in Scripture is that of the Flood. In every crisis when God's people have faced physical or spiritual peril, he has had a faithful remnant. However, at the end of history the remnant does take on special significance. *Biblically, earlier crises such as the Flood are types of the end of the world (Matt 24:36-44; 2 Pet 3:3-7). They are all practice runs for the final showdown.* The New Testament sees the whole Christian Age as one beset by woes that intensify in the final climactic struggle. The greatest physical destruction of history will be at the end, preceded by the greatest apostasy. The wheat and the tares have always been distinct species, but the line of demarcation must be clear before the harvest at the end of the world (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43). *The remnant at the end is cut from the same cloth as the remnant throughout history. It is simply the climactic intensity of the final crisis that is unique, for it is a time of trouble such as there never was before (Dan 12:1).* So the idea of the remnant and the clear identification of the remnant's defining characteristics especially loom large in the final crisis.

Seventh-day Adventists as the Remnant

Seventh-day Adventists emerged from the tattered remains of the Millerite Movement with its strong emphasis on the nearness of Jesus' return. It is hardly surprising, then, that our forebears understood themselves to be the final remnant. This emphasis would only have been reinforced by their experience of revival and disappointment. The proclamation that Jesus was coming in 1844 attracted members of every denomination. But the North American churches at large were not as receptive as hoped. In stead they disfellowshipped their Millerite members. Then came the Great Disappointment when the overwhelming majority of the Millerites renounced their experience, leaving the handful who clung tenaciously to it, feeling more alone than ever.

> As the remnant church, the grace of God calls upon us to extend His invitation to everyone

It took time for the Sabbath-keeping Adventist to understand the full meaning of the mission of the remnant. When Jesus did not return as expected, it was some years before they saw they had a mission to anyone other than other Millerites. Then it took even longer for us as Seventh-day Adventists to see that we had a mission outside of North America, let alone outside other nominally Christian countries. It has only

been in recent years that we have interpreted the Gospel Commission in terms of reaching every cultural group on the planet, not just in terms of reaching every nation state.

There is no shame in the fact that it has taken time for our vision to grow. It also took the disciples time to grasp the breadth of their mission (Acts 10:34-36). However, we have sometimes been slow to understand our full mission as the remnant church. Like Elijah, we have overlooked the seven thousand others beside ourselves who have not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18), the remnant that at the present seems invisible. We have sometimes forgotten that the remnant church was not called into existence for its own sake, but to "function as a catalyst bringing about that final polarization which constitutes the climax of the Great Controversy".[1]

A full understanding of our mission has taken us time. Yet from the earliest days our forebears had a clear understanding of the features that set the remnant apart, features summarized in Rev 12:17.

The Remnant in Rev 12:17

Revelation 12 depicts Satan's war against the righteous in three chronological stages. First, his battle is waged against Christ himself as the child of the women (vss. 1-5, 7-12). Second, he attacks the woman herself (vss. 6, 13-16). Third, he attacks the "remnant of her seed", or as the New International Version expresses, "the rest of her offspring" (vs. 17). The details of this final war are elaborated in Rev 13:8-10, 12-18. These verses paint a picture of a vast spiritual deception, of a time when every evidence of the senses and every decree of government combine to urge the inhabitants of the earth to join in the idolatrous worship of the beast.

It is in this context that Rev 12:17 pictures the remnant of the seed of the woman as those "who keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus". *Our forbears took special notice of this text, for they rightly saw themselves as living at the time when the final showdown had arrived, after the end of the 1260 days/time, times and half a time of verses 6 and 16.* The events of 1798 were of recent historical memory for them. They saw themselves as the church of the end and rightly insisted that God's remnant church is an obedient church, observing all God's commandments and worshipping him in the way that he himself prescribes, however strong the forces brought to bear to sway it to another path. In particular they saw that the fourth commandment requiring the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath should be kept just like the rest of the Ten Commandments, even under pain of death.

In Revelation, the testimony of Jesus is not the testimony we give about Jesus, as important as that testimony is (Rev 12:11). Instead it is the testimony from Jesus, conveyed to the church through the prophets (Rev 1:1-2; 19:10; 22:8-9). Our forebears therefore understood that the remnant church cherishes spiritual gifts, especially Jesus' ongoing communication of his will through the gift of prophecy, which they correctly believed was manifested to them through the ministry of Ellen White.

Closely parallel to Rev 12:17 is Rev 14:12, which speaks of those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. Our pioneers saw that the expression "faith of Jesus" in the latter verse is a parallel to the expression "the testimony of Jesus" in the earlier verse and rightly understood it as focusing on the faithfulness of Jesus in revealing himself to his people. So both texts are remnant texts. The three angels' messages of Rev 14:6-11 form the backdrop of Rev 14:12. The remnant movement is thus the one that carries the three angels' messages to the world, with their proclamation of the gospel, the arrival of the judgment hour, the collapse of Babylon, and the warning against acceding to the enforcement of false worship. All these are features that have characterized the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Jesus, the True Survivor

Yet we haven't always clearly understood the close connection between Rev 12:1-5 and Rev 12:17. If we speak of someone attacking the rest of a group, we imply that part of the group has been attacked already, and that now the attack is being broadened to include the group as a whole. In Rev 12, Satan first attacks Christ as the firstborn seed of the woman, the saving seed promised to Eve and to Abraham (Gen 3:15; 12:7). So in vs. 17 when he attacks the rest of the offspring, it is Christ's brothers and sisters whom he attacks, those who are joint heirs with him by faith (Gal 3:16, 26-29). This group is attacked not in part, but as a whole, just as it is this whole group who will finally manifest the characteristics described in vs. 17, not just a part. We tend to think of remnants as excluding others, but here the remnant becomes as wide as God's salvation itself. Clearly, as the remnant church we have a message of grace that calls us to have our hearts set towards God's true people everywhere, to call them home to him.

This is worlds apart from the contemporary survivor phenomenon. In today's shows every member of the team contributes to the survivor's success, but the survivor eliminates the rest of the team and takes the prize home alone. That is not the way it is with our Big Brother, Jesus. His victory is all his own. We contribute nothing to his saving act on the cross. Yet he does not take the prize home just for himself. He shares his prize with us for eternity, even if we have been the weakest link. What better news could there be for a survival-challenged world than that? ■

1 Jack Provonsha, *"The Church as a Prophetic Minority"*, Spectrum 12/1 (1981): 23.

For reflection . . .

- What is meant by the term "remnant" in the Bible? What meaning besides "survivor" does the term denote?
- Why has the remnant church been called into existence? Do you agree with Jack Provonsha's view?
- The writer argues that it has taken time for Adventists to understand the full meaning of the mission of the remnant. Has our view of the remnant changed much from what it was 100 years ago, and if so, how?