

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Revelation #11

Who am I? Who are You?
The Power of Identity
Revelation 3:7-13

The Bible has a remarkable capacity to challenge and overcome our misperceptions about who we are. When we are inclined to think of ourselves as *orphans*, the biblical text declares that we are the *adopted children* of God. If we are wracked with *guilt*, the inspired word reminds us that we are *forgiven*. The feeling of being *stained* and *soiled* by sin is overcome with the realization that we are *cleansed* by the blood of Christ and *clothed in his righteousness*.

It's much the same when it comes to our place and role in the church. Many are inclined to view themselves as a blight or blemish on the body of Christ, a useless, transient appendage that contributes little to the advancement of God's kingdom. Utility becomes the measure of their worth. If they **do** little, they **are** little. Feeling ungifted and unqualified, they linger in the shadows, sitting on the back row, rarely if ever asked for their opinion and even less often willing to step forward and contribute positively to the welfare of the body as a whole.

Here in Revelation 3:12-13, the Word of God again graciously reminds us of God's perspective and reverses the paralyzing impact of false perceptions. Our Lord's words of promise and reassurance to those who persevere in their commitment to Jesus have bolstered and buoyed our faith throughout the course of these seven letters. Nowhere is this more vividly seen and felt than in his comments to the church at Philadelphia. To the one who conquers, he again promises,

“I will make him a **pillar** in the **temple** of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 3:12-13).

We Are God's Temple

The imagery of the individual Christian and the corporate church as the temple of God is a familiar one in Scripture. For example,

“Do you not know that *you are God's temple* and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and *you are that temple*” (1 Cor. 3:16).

“Or do you not know that *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit* within you, whom you have from God?” (1 Cor. 6:19).

“in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a *holy temple* in the Lord. In him *you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God* by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:21-22).

“As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, *you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house*, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5).

[Permit this me this momentary aside. The only temple in which God will ever dwell is his Son, Jesus Christ, and the body of Christ, the Church. Any suggestion that God will sanction and approve of the rebuilding of a literal, physical temple in Jerusalem is utterly inconsistent with what we read in the NT. *We* are the temple of God. God’s people, the Church, are his dwelling place.]

The metaphor is obviously fluid and thus there is no inconsistency in affirming that we are both the temple and the pillars within it. In declaring that he will make us pillars our Lord is honing in on one (or perhaps several) crucial truth about our relationship with him and our place in his purposes.

There are several Old Testament references that might serve as the possible backdrop for this portrait. We read in 1 Kings 7:13-22 of the two pillars constructed for Solomon’s temple, ornate and awesome in their beauty and strength.

The reference to the “pillar” may continue (from Rev. 3:7) the allusion to Isaiah 22:22 where Eliakim’s relatives achieve glory by hanging on him as a peg firmly attached to a wall (v. 24). Beale points out that “some Greek OT witnesses even refer to Eliakim as being set up as a ‘pillar’ in Isa. 22:23” (295). Thus, “in contrast to Eliakim’s dependents, who eventually lost their glory and position in the palace when he was finally removed (cf. Isa. 22:23-25), the followers of Jesus will never be removed from their position in the temple/palace because Jesus, the ‘true’ Messiah, will never lose his regal position in the presence of his Father” (295).

The concept of God’s people as a “pillar” is also found in Jeremiah 1:18 where the emphasis is on strength and stability and resistance to attack from the enemy. There is certainly NT precedence for describing God’s people as “pillars”, as seen in 1 Timothy 3:15 where the church itself is called “a pillar and buttress of the truth.” In Galatians 2:9, Paul refers to James, Peter, and John as “pillars” of the NT church.

So what point is Jesus making in Revelation 3:12? In what sense will he make the overcomer or “the one who conquers” a “pillar in the temple” of his God?

A few have suggested that this is an allusion to the custom in which the provincial priest of the imperial cult, at the close of his tenure in office, erected in the temple area his statue or pillar inscribed with his name (together with the name of his father, his home town, and his years in office). However, several have pointed out that little evidence exists for this practice and that Philadelphia didn't even have a temple dedicated to the imperial cult until early in the third century a.d.

Perhaps the language is simply *a metaphor of eternal salvation*. Special emphasis may be on the *security* of our position as God's dwelling place in view of the assurance that "*never shall he go out of it.*" This declaration would have carried special significance for those in Philadelphia: although they are expelled from Satan's synagogue (Rev. 3:9) they find a permanent place in God's temple.

Furthermore, as Mounce has noted, "to a city that had experienced devastating earthquakes [a massive quake devastated the city in 17 a.d.] which caused people to flee into the countryside and establish temporary dwellings there, the promise of permanence within the New Jerusalem would have a special meaning" (120-21). Thus, to a people familiar with uncertainty and weakness (cf. 3:8), it certainly conveys the idea of stability and permanence in the believer's relationship with God.

A friend recently reminded me that the key to this passage may be found in Psalm 144:12 - "May our sons in their youth be like plants full grown, our daughters *like corner pillars cut for the structure of a palace*" (Psalm 144:12; or, "*fashioned as for a palace,*" NASV). From this we see that the purpose of a pillar was more than simply to uphold a palace, more than simply to provide support or serve a load-bearing function. Rather, pillars were designed to *adorn* a palace. Perhaps, then, it is the *beauty* of a pillar that is in view and not simply its utility.

This man wrote to me of his many journeys throughout the Middle East and especially his visit to countless mosques. A number of pillars he saw were made of elaborately hand-carved wood, while others were covered with thousands of individually handcrafted ceramic tiles. He noted that "even the adjective 'opulent' seems too restrained for many of these pillars." More important still, "the degree and level of the craftsmanship of a mosque is always in direct correlation to the status of the builder, its beauty a visible demonstration of the builder's benevolence to the community."

While such pillars may serve practical functions, "their aesthetic beauty deliberately overshadows their usefulness, and for the thoughtful soul this opens a wonderful window into the imagery" of Revelation 3.

"In much of the church world," he astutely notes, "our usefulness is what seems to matter: if we can teach the Bible in a community group, lead an outreach, or organize a committee, then we are 'an asset to the church.' But in his words to the church of Philadelphia, Jesus assures us that our place in God's presence is not based on our utility – he certainly does not need us to uphold

his temple!” Rather, we are placed near the King of kings, and adorned with his profound spiritual beauty in order to reflect the majesty and graciousness of the One in whom we “are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22).

Whatever struggle may be yours in trying to identify yourself and your place in the kingdom of God, never forget that you are his dwelling place, the heart of his abode, and as a pillar in this temple you will reflect his beauty and splendor forever and ever, never to go out of it, ever!

The Life-Changing Power of Knowing Who You Are

As mentioned earlier, Christians often struggle with **a sense of identity**. They fail to grasp who they are by virtue not merely of creation but especially regeneration and redemption. A failure to embrace our new identity and the privileges and responsibilities that come with it can be devastating. Virtually every assault and accusation of Satan is grounded in his effort to convince us we **are not** who God, in fact, declares **we are**. God says “This is who you are” and Satan says, “No, you’re not.” If the enemy can persuade you that you are a spiritual impostor, an interloper, an unwanted and unqualified intruder into the kingdom of God, his victory is virtually assured.

On the other hand, if I’m able to rest securely in who I am in Christ, **an identity forged by forgiveness not failure**, by his goodness rather than mine, I am enveloped and enclosed in a veritable fortress of strength and protective love. No assault will prevail. No accusation will stand. No insinuation, however subtle, will undermine my confidence or sow seeds of suspicion in my soul. **I am who he says I am by virtue of what he has done and will do**. It’s just that simple.

Three New Names

This is the great practical payoff of a glorious principle based on a God-ordained promise in Revelation 3:12. Look at it again:

“I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and **I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name**. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 3:12-13).

If ever you and I needed to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” it is now. So may God enable us to listen carefully and confidently.

Here is your current identity and ultimate destiny if you know Christ truly. It consists in having inscribed on your heart the name of God, of his city, and of his Son! There is, of course, as is the case with virtually all spiritual realities, a sense in which this is *already* true of us though *not yet* consummated. What we *are now*, we *shall* be in eternal verity, forever.

First, written on us is “the name of my God,” says Jesus. There is a rich background in the Old Testament for this statement. One hardly knows where to begin. But let’s start with Exodus 28:36-38, where we read,

“You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, ‘Holy to the LORD.’ And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue. It shall be on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron’s *forehead*, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. ***It shall regularly be on his forehead***, that they may be accepted before the LORD” (Exodus 28:36-38).

It doesn’t stop there. Consider these several instances of God’s people receiving his name:

“... *everyone who is called by my name*, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (Isa. 43:7).

“I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; *I will give them an everlasting name* that shall not be cut off” (Isa. 56:5).

“The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and *you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give*” (Isa. 62:2).

“You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse, and the Lord GOD will put you to death, but *his servants he will call by another name*” (Isa. 65:15).

In the priestly blessing that we often cite today as a benediction, God declares that “they will put *my name* upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:27; see also Deut. 28:10 and Daniel 9:18-19).

In ancient times, especially in the world of magic, to know someone’s name was to gain power over them. As a counterpoint, then, to be called by God’s name certainly suggests his sovereign rights over us as his children. It also points to ownership and consecration: our lives should be dominated and determined by our identity as his own, shaped and fashioned in godliness according to his glorious image.

Second, Jesus promises to inscribe on us “the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven.” This should come as no surprise, given what the NT says about our citizenship in the New Jerusalem (see Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20). The author of Hebrews makes this clear:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering” (Heb. 12:22).

Furthermore, in Revelation 21:2-8 the people of God are virtually identified with the New Jerusalem. In other words, to bear the name of the city of God is more than simply a way of identifying its citizens, its rightful inhabitants. There is also a sense in which we *are* the New Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 56:5; Ezek. 48:35)! At minimum it is a way of stressing our permanent and ever so intimate presence with God and his presence in and for us, forever.

Third, and perhaps most important and precious of all, we shall bear Christ's "own *new* name." Note the emphatic position of the adjective, literally, "*my name, the new.*" Christ's new name can hardly be any of those with which we are already familiar, such as Lord, Messiah, Savior, Son of God, Son of Man, Word, etc. "New" (*kainos*) means more than simply different or recent, as over against what one formerly was designated. Here it means *new in quality, belonging to and characterized by the life and values of the new creation* for which we have already been re-born (2 Cor. 5:17).

This "new name" is another way of alerting us to the fact that there awaits us a fuller, indeed infinitely expansive, revelation of the glory and beauty of Christ beyond anything we have seen, heard, or understood in this life. Whatever we know of Christ, however rich the treasures we enjoy of him in the present, whatever knowledge or insight into the unsearchable depths of his wisdom, knowledge, ways, and judgments we are graciously enabled to experience, *all is but a sub-microscopic drop in the vast ocean of a spiritually macroscopic revelation yet to come!*

Let's also not forget that being given a new name in biblical tradition is most often associated with the idea of receiving a *new status, function, or change in character and calling* (see Genesis 32:28). I can't even begin to speculate on what this entails for us in the ages to come!

And what, precisely, is this new name? We don't have a clue! In fact, its secrecy or hiddenness is one of its priceless qualities, for an unknown name suggests again that we who are called by it and have it inscribed on our souls are invulnerable to the enemy's attack. What Satan does not know, he cannot destroy. To be called by this "new name" is to be preserved for fellowship and intimacy with our Lord that none can touch or disrupt.

Conclusion

I want to close with a vivid illustration of the power of identity in the life of God's people, as seen in a brief clip from the movie *Blood Diamond*.

Let me set the stage for what you are about to see. The year is 1999 and the place is Sierra Leone in Africa. The country has been ravaged by political unrest. One particular rebel faction known as the Revolutionary United Front (or RUF) is terrorizing the countryside. They attack villages without mercy, take captive everyone who survives, and then force them to harvest diamonds to fund their war effort.

One man who is forced to search for diamonds by the RUF is a fisherman named Solomon Vandy. One morning he discovers an enormous pink diamond in the riverbank and buries it with the intent of returning later to keep it for himself.

When the area is raided by government security forces, Vandy is thrown in jail, where he meets a man named Danny Archer, played by Leonardo DiCaprio. Archer is a Rhodesian gun runner who is trying to smuggle diamonds into Liberia.

Archer finds out about the pink diamond that Vandy discovered and works to have him released from detention. Meanwhile, in one of the attacks launched by the RUF, Vandy's young son, Dia, is captured and forced to serve in the RUF as a child soldier. They seem to have brainwashed Dia and turn this precious young boy into a vicious fighter. Archer joins Solomon Vandy in a search to recover his son Dia with the understanding that Vandy will show him where the pink diamond is buried.

They find Dia among the RUF, but he refuses to acknowledge his father. Mercenaries attack the camp and kill virtually all of the RUF soldiers. Archer and Vandy escape, dig up the diamond, only to be confronted at gunpoint by young Dia.

What I'm asking you to take note of is the transformation that occurs in young Dia as his father awakens him to who he is. A young boy who has been brainwashed by his captors and turned into a vicious child soldier is angry and defiant. You can see it in his eyes as he holds his own father at gunpoint. But when he is confronted with the love of his father, Vandy, when he is reminded of *his true identity*, everything changes. It is at this point that we pick up in the film. It is only 2 ½ minutes long, but *the transforming power of a renewed awareness of one's identity is unmistakably powerful*. Solomon Vandy's accent is difficult to understand, so I've provided you with a translation of his comments to young Dia.

“Dia. What are you doing? Dia. Look at me. What are you doing? You are Dia Vandy, of the proud Mende tribe. You are a good boy who loves soccer and school. Your mother loves you so much. She waits by the fire making plantains and red palm oil stew, with your sister N'yanda. And the new baby. The cows wait for you, and Babu the wild dog who minds no one but you. I know they made you do bad things. But you are not a bad boy. I am your father who loves you. You will come home with me and be my son again.”

Those of you who know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, do you know who you are? You are a child of the Most High God who loves you, who wants you to come home with him and be his son, his daughter, once again. And how important is it for you to know who you truly are? Simply put, your life will never change for the good until you embrace your true identity in Christ. *Identity governs behavior. You will always behave in accordance with who you believe you are.* It was true of young Dia, and it is all the more true for you and me.