

THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

REVELATION 3 — WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Setting the Scene

The messages to the seven congregations continue, with the final three addressed in Revelation 3. They are in Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Like the four congregations in Chapter 2, these were real communities living in real cities, and Yeshua speaks to circumstances they would have recognized immediately. Each had problems and perspectives that we will uncover. Yeshua uses those local realities as He speaks to His people.

Another theme runs through these three messages: names and reputations. Sardis has a name, but Yeshua says it is something else. Philadelphia has not denied Yeshua's name, and Yeshua promises to write upon the overcomer the name of God, the name of the New Jerusalem and His own new name. What people call us, what we call ourselves and what God calls us may be very different things.

That makes Revelation 3 uncomfortably personal. A congregation can have a wonderful reputation and still be dying. Another can appear weak and yet have an open door that no one can shut. A wealthy congregation can think it needs nothing while Yeshua sees poverty, blindness and nakedness. Once again, the question is not merely what other people think of us. Yeshua knows His people as they really are.

Lesson Summary

Revelation 3 completes Yeshua's messages to the seven congregations. Sardis has a reputation for life but is spiritually dead. Yeshua calls its people to wake up, strengthen what remains and repent. Yet even there, a few have remained faithful. To the one who overcomes He promises white garments, a secure name in the book of life and acknowledgment before His Father and the angels.

Philadelphia receives no rebuke. The congregation has little strength, yet it has kept Yeshua's word and has not denied His name. Yeshua places before it an open door that no one can shut. He promises to keep His faithful people, make the overcomer a pillar in God's temple, and write upon that person the name of God, the New Jerusalem and Yeshua's own new name.

Laodicea presents a very different picture. The congregation sees itself as rich and needing nothing, but Yeshua describes it as wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. Its lukewarmness is intolerable. Yet even this severe message comes from love: "Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline." Yeshua calls them to be zealous and repent, and He stands at the door offering restored fellowship.

Three congregations, three very different conditions, and three assessments from the One who sees what reputation, weakness and prosperity can hide.

The Big Idea

What's in a name?

In the Bible, a name can say something about identity, character and reputation. Sports teams and airlines, supermarket chains and boutiques work on this. Both companies and individual human beings spend enormous amounts of their resources to establish names for themselves. Genesis 11 tells us that the people at Babel wanted to “make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4). Then in the very next chapter God calls Abram and promises, “I will make your name great” (Genesis 12:2). There is an enormous difference between the name we manufacture for ourselves and the name God gives us.

That contrast comes alive in Revelation 3. Our reputation is what other people think we are. Sometimes it is even what we have convinced ourselves we are. But Yeshua sees beyond other people's evaluations and reputation. The name that finally matters is the one He knows, keeps, confesses and gives.

Opening Prayer

Father, You know me better than I know myself. You see beyond the name I have made, the reputation I have gained and the things I tell myself about who I am. Show me where I need to wake up, where I need to hold fast and where self-sufficiency has made me blind to my need of You. Keep me faithful to the name of Yeshua. Give me ears to hear what Your Spirit says, and make what You say about me more important than what anyone else says—including me. Amen.

Commentary

Sardis — A Name for Being Alive (3:1-6)

Sardis was a city with a great name and a great past. It had once been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and was associated with enormous wealth. By John's day much of that former glory was behind it, but the reputation remained. The city was also known for its wool and dye industries and for the worship of the goddess Cybele. That background makes Yeshua's opening words particularly sharp: “You have a name that you are alive, and yet you are dead” (3:1).

There is our theme: a name. Sardis had a reputation. People apparently knew this congregation as a living, active community. Perhaps the meetings were well attended. Perhaps things looked successful. Whatever produced the reputation, Yeshua was not impressed by it. He saw something entirely different. Other people said, “Alive.” Yeshua said, “Dead.”

That is frightening because reputation can fool almost everyone—including us. We can become so accustomed to what people say about us that we begin to believe our own publicity. A congregation can have programs, activity, good teaching, a history of effective ministry and even good works, while something at its spiritual center is dying. Yeshua does not measure life by activity. He says, “I know your deeds.” And His assessment is the one that matters.

What characterizes death? Doctors declare a body as dead when it no longer responds to stimuli. That remains useful here. Life responds. A spiritually dead person or congregation can be surrounded by the activity of God and remain strangely unresponsive—to His Word, to His correction, to worship, to the needs of others. Paul uses similar language in 1 Timothy 5:6 when he describes someone who “is dead even while she lives.” Spiritual death can exist beneath the appearance of life.

Yeshua therefore commands Sardis, “Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die” (3:2). That tells us something important. The situation is desperate, but it is not hopeless. Something remains. Yeshua has not finished with them. Wake up. Strengthen what remains. Remember what you received and heard. Keep it. Repent. These are not instructions for building a better reputation. They are instructions for recovering spiritual life.

Sardis itself should have understood the warning to wake up. The city sat in what appeared to be an almost impregnable position, high above the surrounding plain. Yet more than once in its history Sardis had fallen because defenders became careless and an enemy found a way into the city. A city famous for failing to watch receives the command from Yeshua: “Wake up.” And He warns that if they do not, He will come “like a thief,” at an hour they do not expect (3:3). Their history had already taught them what happens when people assume they are secure.

Yet Yeshua says there are “a few names in Sardis who have not soiled their garments” (3:4). Notice again the language of names. The congregation as a whole has a name that does not match reality, but within it Yeshua knows individual names. He knows those who have remained faithful even when the larger community has declined.

The imagery of clothing would also have spoken naturally in this city associated with wool and dyeing. Some have soiled their garments; the faithful will walk with Yeshua in white. Isaiah uses similar imagery when he speaks of being clothed with garments of salvation and a robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10). Paul reminds us that we are God’s workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua for good works (Ephesians 2:10). The works do not make us worthy of Yeshua. They are evidence of the life He has given us.

I want to be clear about that word “worthy” in verse 4. We do not earn our standing with God by accumulating enough obedience, religious activity or good works. Our worthiness rests in Yeshua and what He has done for us. Revelation itself will make that unmistakable when

heaven asks, “Who is worthy?” and ultimately directs our attention to the Lamb (Revelation 5). Our confidence is not in an exaggerated view of ourselves but in the Worthy One.

Then Yeshua returns to the language of names: “I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (3:5). That takes us back to the famed Tower of Babel. At Babel people said, “Let us make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4). The Lord was not in favor of that action and caused the dissolution of the tower’s building. People could not speak to one another with understanding, and as a result ‘babel’ (which means ‘confusion’) resulted. Immediately afterward God calls Abram and among other promises says, “I will make your name great” (Genesis 12:2).

Those are two very different ways of getting a name.

Babel represents human beings constructing significance for themselves. Abram receives his name from God. Sardis has constructed a reputation for being alive, but Yeshua sees through it. The faithful do not need to manufacture a name for themselves. Yeshua knows their names, keeps their names and promises to confess their names before His Father and the angels.

That is far better than seeing our name in lights, on a building, on a body of water or anywhere else people establish reputations. Human recognition lasts only as long as people remember us. The name that finally matters is the name Yeshua acknowledges in heaven.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (3:6). Sardis forces us to ask an uncomfortable question: Am I living on reputation, or am I responding to God now? Yesterday’s faithfulness cannot substitute for today’s life with Him. Yeshua’s command is wonderfully immediate: Wake up. Strengthen what remains. Remember. Keep it. Repent.

And if there is still something remaining, there is still something Yeshua can strengthen.

Philadelphia — Little Strength, an Open Door and a New Name (3:7–13)

Philadelphia was only about thirty miles southeast of Sardis, but its circumstances were quite different. The city had been founded as an outpost of Greek culture, situated where the Greek world met the regions further east. In that sense, Philadelphia had something of a missionary purpose long before the Gospel arrived: it was intended to carry Greek language and culture beyond itself. That background makes Yeshua’s words especially interesting: “Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut” (3:8).

Philadelphia also knew instability. A devastating earthquake struck the region in AD 17, and aftershocks continued for years. Buildings were damaged, rebuilt and sometimes abandoned again. People who lived there knew what it meant to leave the city because it was unsafe and then return when the danger had passed. Against that background, Yeshua’s later promise that the overcomer will be made “a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore” (3:12) would have carried considerable weight. They lived in a place where buildings and lives could be shaken. Yeshua promised something much more permanent.

Notice first how Yeshua identifies Himself: “He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens” (3:7). The language of the key comes directly from Isaiah 22:22. There Eliakim is given authority over the household of King Hezekiah: “Then I will put the key of the house of David on his shoulder; when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open.” John expects us to hear that scripture from the Tanakh behind Yeshua’s words.

The key represents authority. Eliakim was authorized to act on behalf of the king. Here Yeshua possesses the key of David. He is not merely another servant in the royal household. Eliakim is regarded by many theologians as a type of the Messiah, the Son of David, with authority to open and close. In Chapter 1 we saw Yeshua holding the keys of death and Hades. Now He holds the key of David. Doors do not finally open because we are powerful enough to force them, nor remain closed because somebody else is powerful enough to stop an intruder. Yeshua opens and no one shuts; He shuts and no one opens.

Then comes the remarkable commendation: “You have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name” (3:8). Philadelphia apparently was not an impressive congregation by ordinary standards. It had little strength. Yet Yeshua does not criticize them for being small or weak. He commends them for being faithful.

That is worth hearing. We in the West often measure ministries and congregations by size, money, influence, buildings and visibility. Yeshua measures Philadelphia by something else: they kept His word and did not deny His name. Little strength is not the same thing as little faithfulness. In fact, sometimes knowing that we have little strength leaves us more dependent upon the One who has all authority.

The open door in verse 8 has often been understood as an opportunity for mission. Paul uses “open door” in that sense elsewhere (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). Given Philadelphia’s history as a city through which Greek culture spread into the surrounding region, that possibility is especially attractive. The congregation with “little power” may have been given an opportunity far greater than its apparent resources.

But the emphasis is not on their ability to open the door. Yeshua says, “I have put before you an open door which no one can shut.” Mission begins with His authority, not ours. We walk through doors He opens.

Verse 9 brings us to difficult language similar to what we encountered in Revelation 2:9: “the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie.” (3:9) We need the same care here that we used with Smyrna. John is Jewish, Yeshua is Jewish, and the earliest believers were Jewish. This is not a condemnation of Jewish people or biblical Judaism. It reflects a painful first-century conflict involving communities making competing claims about faithfulness to the God of Israel and about Yeshua the Messiah. The tragic history of Christian antisemitism makes careless use of this verse particularly dangerous.

Yeshua promises that those opposing the Philadelphia believers will ultimately recognize, “I have loved you” (3:9). The point is vindication. A congregation that looks weak and may have been rejected by others is known and loved by Yeshua. Once again, reputation on earth and Yeshua’s assessment can be very different things.

Because Philadelphia has persevered, Yeshua says, “I also will keep you from the hour of testing” (3:10). Christians have debated exactly how this promise relates to later events in Revelation and to future tribulation. But before turning it into a timetable, we should hear what it said to Philadelphia. These believers had kept Yeshua’s word of perseverance. He assures them that He knows their faithfulness and will keep them through what is coming. The emphasis is not an invitation to calculate dates. It is a promise from Yeshua to people who need courage to remain faithful.

Then He says, “I am coming quickly; hold firmly to what you have, so that no one will take your crown” (3:11). Philadelphia is not told to invent a new strategy. Hold fast. They have little strength, but they have something precious: Yeshua’s word, Yeshua’s name and Yeshua’s promise. Keep holding on.

The imagery in verse 12 would have been especially powerful in this earthquake-prone city: “The one who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore.” Philadelphia knew pillars. After an earthquake, pillars could sometimes remain standing when much around them had collapsed. The believers also knew what it meant to leave buildings and even the city itself when the ground became unsafe. Yeshua promises permanence: a pillar that remains and a home from which they will never again have to flee.

Peter uses similar language when he calls believers “living stones” being built into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). The imagery is not that we become pieces of celestial architecture. Yeshua is promising belonging, stability and permanence in the presence of God. Everything around Philadelphia could shake. What God builds will remain.

And then our theme returns with extraordinary force: names. “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 out of heaven from My God, and My new name” (3:12).

Philadelphia had experienced changes of name in its own history, including names adopted in honor of imperial benefactors. Human rulers could put their names on cities. Yeshua offers another kind of naming altogether. God’s name speaks of belonging to Him. The name of the New Jerusalem identifies our true citizenship and home. Yeshua’s new name identifies us with the King Himself.

When I fly into one country or another I show my passport and any further required documentation. When I fly into a country of which I’m a citizen, that process is significantly faster and easier. When we get our new name from Yeshua, our citizenship is stable and based on our relationship with Him (Philippians 3:20).

Sardis had a name that did not match reality. Philadelphia has little strength but has not denied Yeshua's name. And now Yeshua promises to place His names upon His people. That is quite a trade.

The world can give us titles, reputations and recognition, and it can take them away just as quickly. Cities can change names when emperors change. Buildings can fall. Economies can collapse. Doors that looked secure can close. But Yeshua says there is a door no one can shut, a pillar that will not fall, a city we will not have to leave and a name that He Himself will give us.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (3:13). Philadelphia reminds us that little strength is enough when it is placed in the hands of the One who holds the key.

Laodicea — Rich, Self-Sufficient and Lukewarm (3:14–22)

The final congregation is Laodicea, and Yeshua saves some of His strongest language for it. Laodicea was a prosperous commercial and banking center located along important trade routes in Asia Minor. The city was also known for its textile industry and for medical treatments associated particularly with the eyes. After a devastating earthquake in AD 60, Laodicea was wealthy enough to rebuild without depending upon imperial financial assistance. That says something about the city's character: Laodicea knew how to take care of itself.

That civic confidence seems to have entered the congregation. Yeshua quotes its self-assessment: “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing” (3:17). That is an extraordinary claim for any believer to make. Need of nothing? Yet the greater problem is that they apparently believe it.

Yeshua's assessment is exactly the opposite. They do not realize that they are “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (3:17). A city known for wealth is poor. A city associated with treatment for the eyes is blind. A city known for its clothing is naked. Yeshua takes the things in which Laodicea had learned to place confidence and turns every one of them upside down.

Before giving that diagnosis, however, Yeshua tells us who is speaking: “The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God” (3:14). Amen is a Hebrew word we normally use at the end of a prayer or statement. It expresses truth, certainty and agreement: this is trustworthy; let it be so. But Yeshua takes the word as a title. He is “the Amen.”

Isaiah 65:16 twice describes God as the “God of truth,” literally the God of Amen. That background helps us hear the force of Yeshua's words. His assessment of Laodicea is not one opinion among many. He is the faithful and true Witness. When Laodicea says, “We are rich,”

and Yeshua says, “You are poor,” the congregation has to decide whose assessment is true. Yeshua is the Amen.

Then comes the famous language: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (3:15–16).

We often hear this as though Yeshua would rather someone be spiritually cold and opposed to Him than half-heartedly Christian. I’m not convinced that is the point. Both hot and cold water can be useful. Hot water can cleanse and soothe; cold water can refresh. Lukewarm water is neither. It is unpleasant and useless for either purpose.

The local geography makes the picture even more vivid. Nearby Hierapolis was famous for its hot mineral springs. Colossae was associated with refreshing cold water. Laodicea’s own water had to travel some distance through an aqueduct system and could arrive warm and mineral-laden. The people who first heard this message did not need a theological lecture to understand the reaction Yeshua describes. They knew lukewarm water.

The problem, then, is not merely that the Laodiceans need to become more enthusiastic at religious meetings. Their self-sufficiency has made them spiritually ineffective. They believe they need nothing, and people who need nothing have little reason to ask for help and to depend upon God.

That may be one of the most dangerous forms of spiritual blindness because prosperity can disguise it. When we are desperate, we know we need help. When the bank account is healthy, the ministry is functioning, the building is paid for, people respect us and everything appears successful, we can slowly begin to believe that we are doing rather well. We can say that we trust God while quietly constructing a life in which we rarely need to.

God, please help us to know how desperately needy we really are.

Yeshua therefore counsels them to buy from Him “gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself,” and “eye salve to apply to your eyes, so that you may see” (3:18). Once again He uses the language of their city. They understand gold. They understand clothing. They understand medicine for the eyes. But what they most desperately need cannot be supplied by the banking houses, textile industry or physicians of Laodicea. They must receive it from Yeshua.

And then we discover something important about the severity of His rebuke: “Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent” (3:19). Yeshua is not standing at a distance disgusted with these people and hoping to be rid of them. He confronts them because He loves them. Biblical love does not always whisper comforting and non-confrontational things. Sometimes love says, “You cannot see what you have become.” The rebuke is severe because the relationship matters.

There is an interesting word connection here. The Greek words translated “hot” in verse 15 and “be zealous” in verse 19 come from the same family of words associated with heat or boiling. Yeshua has called them lukewarm; now He tells them to become zealous. Wake up from comfortable self-sufficiency. Repent. Become earnest about the things of God.

Then comes one of the best-known verses in Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me” (3:20).

We have often heard that verse used evangelistically, and there is certainly a Gospel truth in the picture of Yeshua inviting people into relationship with Him. But in its immediate setting Yeshua is speaking to a congregation of believers. These are people who carry His name, yet somehow Yeshua is pictured outside the door. That may be even more sobering.

A congregation can have buildings, services, programs, theology and activity—and leave Yeshua standing outside. The answer is not another program. “If anyone hears My voice and opens the door.” Once again Revelation returns to hearing. The invitation is personal even though the message is addressed to a congregation. Anyone can hear. Anyone can open.

And what does Yeshua want when the door opens? Fellowship. “I will dine with him, and he with Me.” In the biblical world, sharing a meal expressed relationship, welcome and belonging. Yeshua does not merely want Laodicea to improve its performance statistics. He wants His people back at the table with Him.

There may even be an echo here of Eden. Humanity hides from God and is driven from the garden, losing the unhindered fellowship for which we were created. Here Yeshua stands at the door inviting His people back into fellowship. Laodicea says it needs nothing. Yeshua offers what it needs most: Himself. And once again, the greatest reward is Yeshua.

The promise then expands: “The one who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat with My Father on His throne” (3:21). The congregation that thinks it already has everything is being offered something its wealth could never purchase: participation in the victory and reign of Messiah.

Revelation 3 began with Sardis, a congregation with a great name but no life. Philadelphia had little strength but had not denied Yeshua’s name. Laodicea finishes the chapter with almost everything the world could call success, yet it desperately needs what only Yeshua can give.

That brings us back to the question with which we began: What’s in a name? Apparently, not always what we think. Sardis had a reputation for life and was dead. Philadelphia looked weak and was faithful. Laodicea called itself rich and was poor. Human reputations can be badly wrong. Even our own assessment of ourselves can be badly wrong. What matters is what the faithful and true Witness says.

And yet the chapter does not end with condemnation. Yeshua knows the faithful names in Sardis. He places His name upon those in Philadelphia. He knocks on Laodicea's door and invites anyone who hears to open it.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (3:22). What's in a name? Ultimately, the answer depends upon who is doing the naming.

Takeaways

1. A reputation is not the same as reality. What other people think about us—even what we think about ourselves—is not the final assessment. Yeshua knows.
2. Little strength does not mean little usefulness. The important question is not how much strength we have, but whether we are faithful with the strength God has given us.
3. Self-sufficiency can become spiritual blindness. The more capable we become of taking care of ourselves, the more deliberately we may need to remember how dependent we are upon God.
4. Hear Yeshua's correction as an expression of His love. God's strongest words are evidence that He has not forgotten us.
5. Let God establish your name. We do not need to spend our lives building a name for ourselves. The name that matters is the one Yeshua knows, confesses and gives.

Memory Verse

Revelation 3:20

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”

What's Next?

We have heard Yeshua speak to all seven congregations. Some were suffering, some compromising, some sleeping, and some far too comfortable. Each congregation had to hear what the Spirit was saying and respond faithfully where God had placed them. But now John looks up.

Revelation 4 opens with “a door standing open in heaven” and an invitation: “Come up here.” That is exactly what these struggling believers need to see. Rome may appear to rule everything around them. But above all of that stands the throne of God. And around that throne John discovers worship, belonging and ultimately home.

Listen to the Original Teaching

“What’s in a Name?” — Revelation 3, 6 November 2004

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