



6. The Dime Bar Church (Rev 3:1-6)

Earle Graser, the original radio voice for the Lone Ranger character, was once coaxed by friends into competing in a contest to see who could best imitate the Lone Ranger's "Hi-Yo, Silver, away!" Although radio continued to use Graser's recorded voice for that one call even after a new Lone Ranger took over the part for the deceased Graser, Graser somehow lost the competition that particular night at the thing for which he was most famous. Sometimes a person's public image gets so big that not even he himself can live up to it.

Thomas Paine: "Reputation is what men and women think of us. Character is what God and the angels know of us."

What was the reputation of the church in Sardis. It was excellent. You are alive. On the outside everything looked lively – but they were dead. And here we see the progression following as we have moved inland. The church at Ephesus was alive but death had started to enter. Smyrna was alive but facing persecution. Pergamum had faced persecution but they were letting the world in. Thyatira had thoroughly let the world in and Sardis was where that road ends. We don't even know really what the sin of Sardis was, just that it was a church on last warning. Jesus said WAKE UP!

What is a dead church? It isn't spelt out, but this phrase helps: **3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.** What were the sins of the churches in Asia? They were the sins of idolatry and immorality – having other gods in their lives and not living in a way that honoured God. What happens when we ignore the warnings of God's word? As I said last time, God is a God who perseveres, waiting for repentance, not a God who tolerates. Perseverance has an end and for Sardis it was the last warning. They either had to wake up or face the consequences. Jesus said **2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.** Strengthen what remains and is about to die. It didn't mean it definitely was going to die, just that it was about to die. They needed to wake up and do something about it.

As I've said before, I would not be so bold as to suggest which one of these churches most represents ours – that's not the purpose of why we have these letters, although I'm sure we've all seen areas where these words relate in our own personal lives and in this church. What they do show however is the anatomy of church death.

Why do churches die? It's important that we know and understand this question and the answers. Churches in Britain are dying. It's an undeniable truth. I've quoted the stats at you many times before. People are leaving church at an unprecedented rate. Church fellowships are closing. Church buildings are finding other uses – houses, flats, carpet warehouses, furniture sales, mosques, kingdom halls!!, warehouses – or just demolished.

Why this death? We have the answer in the seven churches of Asia. Idolatry and immorality. They are the reverse of the 10 commandments and the two commandments. Idolatry – having other gods *besides* God. Immorality – doing that which displeases God. We only need to look at the death of the modern church and we see the same trends – having the gods of self and materialism in our lives. Other things are more important than God. We tolerate the immoral in our lives and in our churches – and then wonder why things are such a disaster.

I guess after five weeks of this that we are beginning to get the idea that God really doesn't tolerate idolatry and immorality in the church and hopefully we have seen how easily it gets into our lives. But we also have the realization that this is not something that happened 2000 years ago – but it is church in Britain in 2006 – it's dying and we can see the cause clearly. Therefore if our church is in decline, we needn't ask the question why or how. We have the answer. We need to face up to where the idolatry and immorality is and repent of it. Jesus says **Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent.**

The problem with Sardis was, that they probably thought that none of this applied to them. They had the reputation of being alive. They knew what death is but they thought they were alive. They were the Dime Bar church – they looked one thing on the outside but were quite different on the inside. In fact things were so bad with their idolatry and immorality that only a few were left that Jesus said had not soiled their clothes. There were just a few faithful out of the church - just a minority.



Dime bar - soft and smooth on the outside, crunchy in the middle

One of the biggest problems with declining churches is they believe they are alive. Being alive is measured in the activities they do – prayer meetings, clubs, socials, activities, meetings of all kinds. Some churches measure it in how exciting the services or in particular the music is. But where is God? By their fruit you shall know them, Jesus said. Man looks at the outward appearance (as God says to Samuel) but God looks at the heart. What's worse, they live in self-denial. The Message puts it like this: *If you pull the covers over your head and sleep on, oblivious to God, I'll return when you least expect it, break into your life like a thief in the night.* Sounds like second coming language from 1 Thessalonians, but I don't think so here. It's a warning, slumber on ignoring God, then you won't be ready for what Jesus is going to do to you. The problem is that churches slumber in self-denial. The fact that they are declining must be something to do with the sovereign will of God, or it must be to do with the evils of this present age, or it must be to do with satan. All have a part to play, but without doubt, sin in the church dominates. What about us?

So what constitutes an alive church then? The answer has appeared all along in a phrase that I've sort of touched on but left it until now to deal with. Here it is in relation to Sardis: *5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.* He who overcomes... In other translations it's put another way – overcomers are conquerors – to those who conquerors.

Jesus talks of two types of believers here – the sleepers and the conquerors. We are the dozy ones – but these words are written, not to condemn but so that we may be conquerors.

In one sense we are conquerors already. *Romans 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* We are in a war that has already been won at Calvary.

We are called therefore not to capitulate – to roll over and go to sleep – but in the battle that is the Christian faith to be more than conquerors. What is clear from the letters to the seven churches was in all of them to some extent they had been conquerors in the past, but now they had let things go and it was bringing judgement on them because of their idolatry and immorality.

But it needn't be like that. God's desire is that we are conquerors because He pours out blessings on those who overcome. His desire for the seven churches was for them to be conquerors.

What are we? Overcomers, or the overcome? Do we walk in victory as a Church? Do we walk in victory as believers. If not, then it's time we put away other gods in our lives. It's time to look at how we spend our time and our money. It's time to reflect on our speech, attitude and actions and let the Holy Spirit reveal to us the actions and attitudes that are keeping us firm seeing God working in a new way amongst us.

Being a Christian never guarantees us freedom from persecution. It never guarantees us good health, abundant wealth and a long life. The blood of the martyrs tells us that if you haven't already realized it. But we can walk in victory. From the fittest rookie, through to the most war-seasoned and battered saint; we can all know victory in our lives. We are called to be that – overcomers, conquerors. That is God's will and destiny for us as individuals. That is His destiny for us as a church.

Our God desires conquerors: and with conquerors come promises

Ephesus : To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God

Smyrna : He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Pergamum : To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it

Thyatira : 6 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations-- 27 He will rule them with an iron scepter; I will also give him the morning star.

Sardis : He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

Philadelphia

Laodicea : 21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Jesus makes promises, not for now but for what is to come.

Notice one thing about all these. They are all promises for eternity and are all promises of assurance of salvation. If you are an overcomer, you know you are going to heaven because of the fact that you have conquered. God is going to bless us, God is going to give generously to us by His grace. It's not guaranteed on Earth, but it is in Heaven. But this assurance only comes through being conquerors. The greatest feature of an alive church is that certainty of salvation and confidence in knowing that we are the people of God.

What are you this morning – a sleeper? Or a conqueror? What are we? A slumbering church or a conquering church

If we are sleeping, it's time to Wake Up! ***He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches***

Time of repentance.

***Preached by Mark Reid
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otherwise stated.***