



## **“Empty Seats”**

**Kevin Presley**

One of the saddest sights to behold is an empty chair. There may be a familiar and comfortable, old chair in your home where someone very dear to you sat, but now that chair sits empty. Perhaps it's a seat left empty at the dinner table by a family member now gone. Looking across the table at that empty chair brings a flood of memories and emotions. There's a scene like that in the Bible. It's one of the saddest, most tender scenes in all of the Old Testament. It was a meeting between two wonderful friends, Jonathan and David.

Jonathan was the son of King Saul, but the relationship between David and Saul was not good. By this time, Saul had become so jealous of David that he was trying to kill him, and David was on the run. That's where the story picks up in our text.

**I Samuel 20:1-6,18 “Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and went and said to Jonathan, “What have I done? What is my iniquity, and what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?” So Jonathan said to him, “By no means! You shall not die! Indeed, my father will do nothing either great or small without first telling me. And why should my father hide this thing from me? It is not so!”**

**Then David took an oath again, and said, “Your father certainly knows that I have found favor in your eyes, and he has said, ‘Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.’ But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.” So Jonathan said to David, “Whatever you yourself desire, I will do it for you.”**

**And David said to Jonathan, “Indeed tomorrow is the New Moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king to eat. But let me go, that I may hide in the field until the third day at evening. If your father misses me at all, then say, ‘David earnestly asked permission of me that he might run over to Bethlehem, his city, for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family.’”**

**Then Jonathan said to David, "Tomorrow is the New Moon; and you will be missed, because your seat will be empty."**

It would be a sad sight for Jonathan to look across the table at the feast and not see his beloved friend, David. Not only because of Jonathan's love for David, but because of the reasons that David's seat would be empty. There are some empty seats in our lives, too, that should make us stop and reflect.

The story we just read takes place while David is fearing for his life. Saul is jealous of young David's successes, so he's tried numerous times to kill him. This placed Saul's son, Jonathan, in a precarious position because Jonathan and David were close friends. Jonathan wanted no harm to come to David, so he had to meet with him in secret to help him. Jonathan could not believe that Saul wanted to murder David, so David came up with a plan to show him and confirm what Saul's intentions were. There was a feast planned that David was expected to attend, but instead, he told Jonathan to make excuse for him; to tell Saul that David had to go to Bethlehem for a yearly sacrifice and see what his father's reaction would be to that. Jonathan agreed to the plan and they made a covenant with one another that day that whatever the outcome was, they would always remain friends. Despite Saul's hatred for David, Jonathan and David would be knit together. They would always remain friends and treat one another's children with favor and kindness. That was the covenant they made, and it ended up saving Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth's life many years later after Jonathan died and David had finally become king.

At this feast, when David was absent, Jonathan was to see just what his father's reaction was and thus, what his true intentions were about David. Jonathan was to then go out and shoot arrows a certain way, signaling to David who was waiting out in the field, whether it was safe to return or flee. When David's absence at the feast was noted by Saul, he went into a rage, just as David predicted. Saul got so angry that he even threw a spear at his own son. Jonathan then got up and left with a heavy heart, knowing that Saul did indeed have evil intentions concerning David.

But the mutual love and respect that Jonathan and David had for one another never wavered. Jonathan loved David until the day he died in battle on the hills of Gilboa. David then kept the promises he had made to Jonathan when he eventually became king. This statement in **verse 18** gives us a glimpse into the way these friends felt about each other.

**I Samuel 20:18 "Then Jonathan said to David, "Tomorrow is the New Moon; and you will be missed, because your seat will be empty."**

There's something sad about looking at an empty seat. In a home once filled with life, love, and laughter, there is just a coldness and a void when we now look across the room at an empty chair where a husband or wife once sat. Maybe a mother or father, or even a child. That empty chair brings back memories. A glance at that silent, still place casts a sudden pall of sadness over the room and makes us very reflective. I recently preached a funeral for a man who was a great friend of 25 years. I flew out to be with the family and when I walked in their home that night, the first sight I saw was his empty chair. That's where he had always sat. His unexpected passing suddenly seemed more real.

I want to talk to you about some empty seats in another place. Not in the home, but in the Church. One of the most difficult and depressing things for a preacher is to stand in a cavernous building somewhere and preach to empty pews. I don't know of anything that will take the wind out of a preacher's sails any more than to stand and preach to an empty building, to look out at empty seats. Only someone who has stood there and looked out across that sanctuary or auditorium can identify with that feeling. It seems that I go to more and more churches where the building once seemed full and the church was bustling

some years ago with life and activity, but now only a few, perhaps elderly saints gather from week to week (God bless them), but the building is mostly empty and quiet. To be honest, it's kind of hard to work up a head of steam when you stand up to preach in that kind of circumstance. It's always sad to me to think back to what was, and to see what now is. It seems to be the case in more and more places. As we see the rapid secularization of our culture, not only is the number of people identifying as Christians steadily declining, but as you might expect, church attendance is quickly shrinking as well. According to Pew Research in 2019, only 44% of Christians attend worship on a weekly basis. 18% show up once or twice a month, and 38% seldom or never attend church services. Those statistics represent people who claim to be Christians! What has happened? Well, a number of things have surely contributed. But when you look at the larger picture, less than half of American millennials even identify themselves as Christians to begin with. That's a startling number. Those numbers are going in the wrong direction. Not only are we seeing lots of empty seats now, but this also points to a very bleak future for many congregations in America and in other places as well. Maybe the saddest aspect is that it doesn't have to be that way. I'm convinced that one of the reasons many churches are struggling as they are today is not because of what is happening on the outside. That's where we often want to point the finger and cast the blame, but the world has always been filled with sin, wickedness, and evil people. But it's what's going on inside, or what ISN'T happening inside. I want to talk to you about some of the sermons the empty seats in our churches ought to be preaching to us.

First, many of those seats are crying out that the Church is in great need of a revival. Many Christians are in desperate need of revival today. Faith is at a low ebb in many a heart. Maybe the events and circumstances of the last year have only done more and more damage. In fact, I'm convinced that for many people, the Coronavirus is simply an excuse. They may never return to worship. It's become too easy to stay home. Too easy to do what else they want to do. It doesn't bother their conscience because for so long, they've been away anyway. Churches are going to feel the spiritual damage that the events of the last year have caused for years and years, maybe even for generations to come. If the Church ever needed a revival in our culture and even around the world, it's today as much as any other day.

**Psalm 85:6 "Will You not revive us again, That Your people may rejoice in You?"**

What's the real problem when it comes to the empty seats in our church houses around the land? People need a revival. We need to turn back to God. We need to awaken to spiritual things, to a zeal for God, and for the things of His word.

**Psalm 119:37 "Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things, And revive me in Your way."**

That word *revive* means *quicken*. *Make me alive in Your way*. This implies that when we look off at worthless things, when we're attached to the world and smitten with the world, we become spiritually dead. The psalmist says, keep me from looking at all of that! Revive me in what is important! Revive me in Your truth, Your will, Your worship, and Your way. That's the real problem with many Christians today, of those of us remaining who profess to be Christians, many are fixed on the things of the world. That's the sad fact of the matter. The Church has become so worldly and so carnally minded in our day and age and our culture. It has so compromised and prostituted itself with the world until it's hard to tell the difference between one and the other. Why SHOULD people be concerned about eternal things? That's one of the reasons pews are empty: people just aren't interested in the Church, in the word of God, or hearing it preached. **Psalm 119** is a psalm of doxology to God's word. The psalmist is asking God to turn his appetite away from worldly pleasures and trivial pursuits of life to seeking after spiritual

things. To turn his heart back to the word of God and the things of God. That's what needs to happen in the Church today. Christians need to make up our minds whether we're going to serve God or not. We need to get off the fence and decide whether we want to spend an eternity in heaven or a few moments of fleeting pleasure here on earth. Are we going to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ or not?

**Matthew 6:33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."**

We are a pleasure-mad society. Sunday, the Lord's Day, has become "Funday." For some, it's a day to work just like any other day. For others, it's the day to go to the lake, the beach, the golf course, or just work in the yard. It used to be hard to find a business open on Sunday, but now, most of what you do on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, you can also do on Sunday. It's just another day. But Sunday is the Lord's Day, and it should certainly be viewed as thus by the Lord's people. That day is to be set apart for any person who claims the name Christian.

**Revelation 1:10 "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day..."**

The New Testament teaches us that Christians come together on the first day of the week. It's a special day when God's people assemble from week to week to remember the Lord's death by eating the Lord's Supper.

**Acts 20:7 "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight."**

That's where we *break bread*, when the church comes together. That's not something we do on our own. It's not something you do with your family at home or by yourself in a hotel room or on a beach somewhere.

**Acts 2:42 "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."**

*Steadfastly* means *regularly, without wavering, faithfully*. The **Hebrew** writer urged those who were being tempted to leave the faith:

**Hebrews 10:24-25 "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."**

Friend, we come together not only to be exhorted, but to exhort everybody else. If I am a Christian, I have just as much of a responsibility to exhort my brethren as my brethren do to exhort and encourage me. If you claim to be a Christian, that's a command for you. It's not an option, it's not a suggestion. It's a direct command in God's word.

Some think they can live a Christian life apart from any involvement in the local church, but that idea is absolutely unbiblical, and it is wrong. Oh, how we need a revival in the Church today. Yes, society may be becoming more secular, but is it any wonder when the Church has such a poor influence and has set such a poor example? When so many Christians have become lukewarm and indifferent about Christ's Church? Friend, assembling with the saints needs to be the number one priority on the Christian's

calendar every first day of the week. I daresay there are some things on your schedule for this coming week—maybe even today—that if someone tried to get you to be somewhere else, you would insist that you can't because you have to be here or there on that day or at that time. If you can do that for a job or for a family function or a doctor's appointment or some special occasion, why can't you be that way about your appointment to gather with the saints and worship the living God? The fact is, we CAN. It's just that we often DON'T.

Stop and think. Your empty seat preaches a sermon. It preaches to a lot of people. It sends a message to God that something is more important than worshipping Him, obeying His word, and keeping your appointment with Him. It sends a message to Jesus that there are things more important than remembering His sacrifice on Calvary by eating the Lord's Supper with the local church. It sends a message to the other Christians by demoralizing and discouraging the work of others. It pours water on their zeal. Indifference, apathy, and worldliness are just as contagious as zeal and godliness. Your empty seat sends a message to the lost, telling them that Christ and the Church for which He died are really not all that important and that your faith is not really worth interrupting your other plans in life for. Other empty seats tell us there are some who need our spiritual help. One of the reasons people find it so easy to fall away is that there is not a lot of attachment to the people in the Church to begin with. There's not a lot of spiritual depth or commitment to Christ and His Church. One of the many flaws of the modern mega-church movement (churches that boast thousands and thousands of members) is that it is nearly impossible for people to truly be discipled and nurtured in the faith after the Bible model, and to build the kind of relationships that the local body should consist of in that kind of environment. Friend, the church is not a business. It's not some marketing scheme or mega-organization built around numbers, budgets, or beautiful campuses. It is an intimately connected body where every part is so connected to every other part that when one part hurts, all hurt. When one part rejoices, all rejoice (**I Corinthians 12**). It's a place where instead of just being a name on a roll or a part of the expected monthly budget, they are vital members of the body where people know their needs, spiritual difficulties, and battles and can render help and encouragement, and yes, accountability. That's God's plan and design for the local church. Churches not only need to be fostering that kind of situation; if you're a Christian, you need to be a living and vital part of such a church.

**Galatians 6:1-2 "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."**

It's hard to bear a person's burdens if you don't know what those burdens are. Most likely, you won't know what the burden is if you don't know the person.

Some empty seats remind us that people have physical needs. I may be speaking to many people right now who are confined to nursing homes, hospitals, or prisons. Perhaps homebound by spiritual illness or disability. You would love nothing more than to be able to get ready and go assemble with the Church today in worship if you could. In nearly every church in every community, there are people in that condition. As those of us who assemble today gather, those empty seats ought to remind us of them. Frankly, it ought to shame some of us who haven't been in a sick room, a hospital, or nursing home in not telling how long to see about those who need our help and encouragement. Some of those people who are missing are some of the most devoted and faithful church members to be found. They deserve our attention and encouragement, our help and our concern.

Lastly, many of our empty seats should remind us that we are rapidly moving toward eternity. The old song says:

*We are going down the valley one by one,  
With our faces tow'rd the setting of the sun;  
Down the valley where the mournful cypress grows,  
Where the stream of death in silence onward flows.*

[We Are Going Down the Valley](#) by Jessie B. Pounds

I've been preaching the gospel now for nearly thirty years. In that time, I've traveled from coast to coast and preached in meetings for churches all across the land. As I return to so many of those places from time to time, I see changes. I see so many familiar seats now empty. In my own congregation, there are several seats now empty where dear old saints—and some, not so old—sat just a few years ago. When I stand in the pulpit sometimes, I can just see their faces and their familiar forms in yesteryear where they always sat. You could always count on them sitting there. When I recall their faces and their faithfulness, I think of people who were dependable, who loved the Lord and His Church, who loved the preaching of the gospel. But they're gone. They've crossed the silent stream to the other side.

You know, sometimes seeing those empty seats brings this sobering realization: one day, my seat, too, will be empty. I'll keep my appointment with death one day, just as you will. Just as one generation comes and goes, so will our generation. I wonder what kind of spiritual legacy we will leave when that time comes? Will your face be conspicuously absent in that little church meeting house? Will people say of you, as Jonathan did so long ago of his faithful friend, David, *You will be missed, for your seat will be empty?*

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