

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE EMPTY SEAT.

A Sermon

WRITTEN WHEN AWAY FROM HIS PEOPLE, BY

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“David’s place was empty.”—1 Samuel xx. 27.

It was quite right that David’s place should be empty, because Saul sought to slay him, and he could not safely sit in the presence of an enemy who had twice before cast a javelin at him to “smite him even to the wall with it.” Self-preservation is a law of nature which we are bound to obey; no man should needlessly expose himself to sudden death. It were well if many a seat were empty for this reason; for there are places exceedingly dangerous to the soul, from which men should rise and flee at once. Where Satan sits at the head of the table no man should tarry. There is the seat of the scorner, of which the Psalmist spoke: God grant that those who have occupied it may leave it in trembling haste. There is the settle of the drunkard, and the chair of the presumptuous, and the bench of the sluggard, from each of which it were wisdom to depart. May the grace of God make such a change in all who have frequented the gatherings of the frivolous and the assemblies of the wicked that they may never be found in them again, but may be missed by their old companions, who shall ask, “Wherefore cometh the son of Jesse, neither yesterday nor to-day?” The javelin of temptation may soon destroy character, prospects, and life itself, and he is guilty of the grossest folly who exposes himself to it by placing himself where the arch-enemy finds chosen opportunities to work his deadly will.

At this time I shall use David’s empty place for quite another purpose, and shall note first that in your assemblies at this time there are SEATS EMPTIED BY DEATH. Before I had left the shores of England for the space of two days I received the grievous intelligence that two out of the membership of my church had been called home in one day. Of a sister, the wife of an earnest and well-beloved deacon it must be said—her place is empty; and of a brother, who had been her friend and mine, the same expression must be employed. Our sympathies must now flow forth to a bereaved husband, and also to a widow, in whose hearts there are places sorrowfully emptied, and in whose homes there will be an empty chair and an empty couch, which will force from their eyes rivers of tears whenever they look upon them. It is our firm hope and confident belief that in these cases the loss of the house of God below is the gain of

the house of God above: they fill other and better places, and even those who loved them best, and miss them most, would not wish to call them back again. Jesus wills that his own should be with him where he is, and we cannot deny that he has a right to have them. Do not their eyes behold the King in his beauty? Would we deprive them of the vision? May the thought of the bliss of the departed yield solace to the surviving, and may divine consolations be richly given by the Holy Ghost in the hour of painful bereavement.

Our places will be empty soon, and we shall be missed from our accustomed pews in the house of prayer; let the seats which have been just vacated remind us of this, and silently call to our remembrance the precept, "Be ye also ready." Use well your places for hearing the gospel, for gathering at the communion table, and for meeting for prayer while yet the opportunities remain to you, for the time is short, and an account will have to be rendered. Love well those who are spared to you, and do them all the good you can, for their places will not hold them for ever. Cheer the aged, console the desponding, help the poor, for they will soon be beyond your reach, and when you look for them you will be told that David's place is empty.

Permit me also to remind you that among your assemblies there are SEATS EMPTIED BY SICKNESS for awhile. You will not forget one place, the most conspicuous, which would be empty were it not filled by willing ministers who supply our lack of service. The providence which empties that place is so wise and good that, though we cannot understand its object, we are sure that it will work for good and for the glory of God. May I ask that, often as I am missed, I may have a fresh interest in your prayers; for these are a minister's wealth, a pastor's portion. Many others of the Lord's family are also sick, and detained at home. They sigh as they remember the happy days when they went up to the house of God in company, and mingled in the solemn feasts of Zion; but for them there are now no more the thunders of our united shouts of praise, nor the deep Amens of our forms of prayer, and they envy the very swallows that build their nests under the eaves of the sanctuary. Many of us have such afflicted ones in our own families, and God forbid that we should cease to sympathize with them in their deprivations. Yet long continuance of health may dry the fountains of pity, and lead to forgetfulness of the sorrows of others; and therefore it is no superfluity when we remind the healthy that there are others far less favoured to whom it is one of their sharpest sorrows that their places at public worship are empty. Let us pray that a portion may be sent to their homes, according to the old law of David, "as his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff: they shall part alike." Let us try to make this rule of battle a matter of fact by carrying home to the Lord's prisoners as much of the sermon as we can. Jacob did not go down at the first to Egypt, for he was aged and infirm, but his sons brought back corn for him none the less. In telling the sick and bedridden the truths which we have heard our own memories will be refreshed. We are bound with those who are in bonds, and we suffer with the suffering, and therefore, if we are living members of our Lord's mystical body, it is to us a matter of personal interest that David's seat is empty.

In every well-ordered congregation there are SEATS EMPTIED BY HOLY SERVICE. Many Christian professors appear to think that their entire religious duty begins and ends with attendance upon the means of grace: no village station receives their ministry, no ragged school enjoys their presence, no street corner hears their voice, but their pew is filled with commendable constancy. We do not condemn such, yet show we unto them a more excellent way. We know scores of brethren and sisters who come to one service on the Sabbath for spiritual food, and then spend the rest of the day in active labour for their Lord. They are not so unwise as to leave their own vineyard untended by neglecting personal edification, but when this is earnestly attended to they hear their Master's call and go forth into the great harvest and use the strength which their spiritual meal has given them. In this way they are even more benefited than if they were always "feeding," for holy exercise helps their mental digestion, and they all the more completely assimilate their sacred food; in addition to which they have struck a blow at the spiritual selfishness which tempts us to enjoy religious feasts and to make ourselves comfortable while sinners are perishing around us. Many are the Christians whose places ought to be empty during part of the Lord's day: they are able-bodied and gifted, and they ought not to eat the fat and drink the sweet all day long, but should be engaged in carrying portions to those for whom otherwise nothing would be prepared. When the great king made a wedding-feast for his son he sent forth his servants into the highways and hedges to compel the wanderers to come in. Did he starve those servants? Assuredly not. Yet he was not content to invite them to the table and leave the outsiders to hunger and faint. His servants found it to be their meat and their drink to do the will of him that sent them, and to finish his work. Even so will believers receive edification while they are seeking the good of others: like swallows, which feed on the wing, they shall find heavenly meat while they fly in the ways of service. The Holy Spirit delights to give more "oil for the light" to those who are diligently shining amid the darkness.

Yet, let me add a warning here: I have known some young believers who have lacked prudence, and have carried a good thing too far. Before they have well learned they have been eager to teach, and to do so they have ceased learning: multiplied engagements have left them no time for their own instruction, and they have left an edifying ministry to enter upon labour for which they were not qualified. Wisdom is profitable to direct. The most of Christians need to fill their seats for a part of the Sabbath, to hear the word of God, and very few can afford to spend the whole day in seeking the good of others. We grieve to meet with some who are absent from the Lord's table for months because of their zealous occupations. This is presenting one duty to God stained with the blood of another. It is the positive duty of every disciple to obey the Lord's command, "This do ye in remembrance of me"; and efforts which necessitate neglect of the divine precept must be curtailed. Often ought we to show his death until he come. School-teaching, street-preaching, sick-visiting, and so forth cannot be regarded as a substitute for hearing the Word, and commemorating the death of the Redeemer. We must have time to sit at the Master's feet with Mary, or soon, like Martha, we shall be cumbered. Nevertheless, despite

this word of caution, I am often glad to hear that "David's place was empty."

It is to be feared that too easily we could find SEATS EMPTIED FOR NO GOOD REASON. Ministers in many congregations are distressed by the irregular attendance of their hearers. A little rain, a slight indisposition, or some other frivolous excuse will keep many at home. A new preacher has come into the neighbourhood, and the rolling stones are moved in his direction for a season to the grievous discouragement of the pastor. This evil of irregular attendance is most manifest at week-day services: there often enough David's seat is empty. No, not David's, for he longs to be even a door-keeper in the house of his God: we mean the seat of Didymus, who was not with the apostles when Jesus came; of Demas, who loved this present evil world; and of many a hearer who is not also a doer of the word. In many a congregation those who gather at meetings for prayer are shamefully few. I have no reason to complain of this as a fault among my own beloved people to any large extent, and yet I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that there are some members of the church who would have to carry their memories a long way back to recollect what a prayer-meeting is like. Little do they know what they have lost by their neglect. Ah, my friend, does that refer to you? Is David's place empty? Then mend your ways and fill it. Of all soul-refreshing seasons I have often found week-night services to be the best. Like oases in a desert, these quiet periods amid the cares of the week wear a greenness peculiar to themselves. Come and try whether your experience will not tally with mine. I believe you will find it good to be there. Children it is said should be fed like chickens, "little and often"; and to my mind, short, lively services coming frequently, on Sabbaths and week-days, are more refreshing than hearing two or even three long sermons on one day in the week only. At any rate it is good for us to keep the feast with our brethren and not to make them ask, "Wherefore cometh not the son of Jesse either yesterday or to-day?"

I must take the liberty of being very personal to the usual attendants at the Tabernacle. Dear friends, do not let your seats be empty during my absence. I shall be distressed beyond measure if I hear that the congregations are declining. The best preachers we can obtain are selected to address you, and therefore I hope you will see no need to forsake your usual place. If you do so it will reflect but small credit upon your pastor's ministry, for it will be manifest that you are babes in grace, dependent upon one man for edification. "All are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas"; and if you are men in Christ Jesus you will get good out of them all, and will not say, "Our own blunt Cephas is away, and we cannot hear any one else." I beseech you be very regular in your attendance during my absence, lest those who preach to you should be discouraged, and ourselves also. Above all, *keep up the prayer-meetings*. Nelson said, "England expects every man to do his duty," and at this time, which is an emergency in our church history, I would say,—the church expects every member to sustain all meetings, labours, and offerings with unflagging energy, and especially to *keep up the prayer-meetings*. There, at any rate, let it not be said of any one of you, "David's place was empty."

Grace, mercy, and peace be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.