

The Empty Seat

Alan Williamson

Following is an update from Romania concerning the circumstances of Valentina Vasile...
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by Alan Williamson

THE EMPTY SEAT

1 Samuel 20:18 "Then Jonathan said to David, Tomorrow is the new moon: and thou shalt be missed, because thy seat will be empty."

The church in Bucuresti, Romania assembled on Sunday, July 12, 1998 as is our custom. As we began our worship to God, we noticed the empty seat where Valentina Vasile liked to stay. Although Valentina was baptized only a few weeks ago, her place in our hearts has been firmly established, a fact owed mostly to the circumstances in which she finds herself. As a new Christian she has faced ridicule and persecution from her family, people who hold to the Romanian Orthodox faith. Their attempts to discourage her in her new faith have not been subtle. Yet in the midst of these trials, Valentina has clung to the "truth" of what she now believes, she is holding fast to the rightness of her decision. The path she has chosen will not be easy.

Two Sundays ago Valentina left her home in the early morning hours to travel from her village to Bucuresti in order to assemble with the Christians here in the city. Her presence among the brethren was warmly received, as we all experienced a strong mix of emotions, joy being the chief sentiment among all our feelings. After a period of worship followed by our Bible study, we left and went our separate ways. For a week we all prayed and hoped we would see Valentina again the following Sunday.

When the day came for assembling, her seat was empty; but her absence did not pass unnoticed. Her commitment to return to us was understood. Her absence could only mean one thing: she had been hindered in some way. Perhaps she was ill and could not make the trip to Bucuresti? Without some word, we have no way of really knowing what happened. Our worst fears are that her family in some way physically prevented her from coming to us. This is a real possibility. But we will have to wait to discover why her seat was empty.

Much can be said about empty seats in the assembly. In many churches empty seats are "common." Some seats are perpetually vacant, a silent commentary on 1) our ineffectiveness in taking the greatest message of love and hope ever heard to a lost and dying world, or 2) the coldness of the hearts of men who will not return to God. Other seats are only empty from time to time. The occupants of such seats have made it their custom to not be present for all the assemblies. In place of being faithful, they have assumed a "hit and miss" approach to church attendance. Because of their lack of steadfastness, no one really notices when they are not there. Their record of sporadic participation has conditioned others to "expect" that their seats will be empty as often as not.

Yet there are some seats in our buildings that justify their existence working hard each meeting to uphold the saint that will always be in his place. These seats are worn and polished by use, and while there may not be name tags to designate whose seat it is, everyone knows who belongs where. When a visitor unknowingly sits down in someone's "place," it is not uncommon for another member to gently inform them that they are in sister so and so's seat. Such seats having been homesteaded through years of occupancy are the landmarks of the faithful in any congregation.

When I think of the empty seat that bore such a thundering mute testimony to the absence of one who wanted so desperately to be here, I am reminded of others through the centuries who were hindered from gathering with the Christians on the first day of the week. I think of the faithful men and women who were chained in some dark prison, deprived of their liberty to travel freely wherever they might want. I envision others spending their last moments in this world nailed to crosses or facing wild beasts and thus hindered, are unable to assemble with the saints. Not a few were the martyrs who paid with their lives the price of believing. And when their seats were "empty," everyone knew where they had gone.

It is our prayer that our sister will overcome her circumstances and be free to attend our service of worship to God. We think of her when she is not with us and we know she is thinking of us, longing to be with us. Also we think of our comparative freedom to choose and move about, a freedom that she does not have at this moment, at least not in the same degree. What a privilege we have to be able to attend worship anytime we want. Maybe that is the rub: you have to "want to." Wanting to be together with the other Christians in the presence of God, to sing His praises, to hear His word, to pray, to commune; this is a veritable feast for the soul hungering and thirsting after God. But, then again, if one is not hungry....

What kind of seat do you occupy in the assembly? Maybe you are one of the privileged who has one of the "chief seats" in the synagogue. Commonly understood to be places in the back of the building where you can come in late and not be noticed, leave early and not be missed, or sleep soundly and not disturb your brethren; these are the most coveted positions by those who want to remain on the fringe of involvement. Often sought out by teens wanting to avoid the watchful eyes of their parents, these places are seldom empty. While the seat might be occupied, an awful emptiness is found in the souls of those who sit in the presence of God, all the while denying Him a place to abide in their hearts. Such will be left standing outside the closed door of heaven when the day of their judgment comes.

Or maybe you have one of the seats used by Christians who cannot decide which church they will attend "regularly." Being members "at large," they switch assemblies week in and week out and are not really expected to be anywhere in particular. This is because they really do not belong to any one local church. Satisfied that they are good Christians because they "attend church," they are not missed by anyone when they are absent.

Better for each Christian to have a seat of their own when assembling with the saints, a place worn familiar through regular use, a place known to be occupied when the call to worship is sent fourth. It is only after one has filled such a position faithfully that an absence will be "noticed." But how long does it take to become faithful in attendance? One can start the first week after conversion. Having made the decision be faithful, it then becomes our responsibility to determine what things we will allow to hinder us from being in our seat when the time for the assembly draws near. If I am not physically being restrained from attending (prison, persecution, slow death by crucifixion), or if I am not sick and physically unable to attend (test this by asking yourself whether you would "go to work" in the same condition), then what will I allow to come between me and worshipping my Savior? It is when brethren know that I will not forsake the assembling of the saints for every slight pretense of an excuse (we had company, the lawn needed mowed, I was tired, etc.), that in the rare occasion when I am not present, I will be missed because my seat is empty.

