

# CONTENTS

Before You Begin . . .	9
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## Part One:

### TAKE YOUR SEAT

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1. Something Missing	13
2. A Single Verb	21
3. Where You Never Sat	37
4. Imagine the Round Table	49

## Part Two:

### SEATED AND SET FREE

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5. From Appearance to Adoration	69
6. From Affluence to Access	87
7. From Achievement to Abiding	103

## Part Three:

### SEATED AND SURRENDERED

---

8. Four Hard but Great Questions	123
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## Part Four:

### SEATED AND SENT

---

9. Available Living	145
10. Seated and Sent	165
11. Moment by Moment	179
Notes	187
Acknowledgments	191

## CHAPTER I



# SOMETHING MISSING

*I ache for something I cannot name.*

—LAUREN SLATER, American psychologist

I was thirty-seven years old when I discovered a vital truth about Jesus.

A lightning bolt of realization hit me on a summer day in late July as I wondered over the phrase in Ephesians 2:6 that “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” I closed my eyes and began to think about my life.

I knew Jesus. I loved Jesus. I worshiped and served Him. I read my Bible, studied Christian concepts, kept a detailed prayer journal, shared my faith, met regularly with other Christians in church and in small group Bible studies, and worked for my community in various ways. I was the mom listening to Christian music in the kitchen, teaching Bible verses to my children, and rejoicing over what a great God I served. I loved my husband and our two beautiful elementary school-aged children. I blogged daily and wrote novels. Life often felt full and blessed.

But something was missing.

I did not know how to name it. Underneath the activity of my life ran a dark undercurrent of sin. I felt a subtle corrosion that something did not ring true about me. Something false, inauthentic, and

impure governed my life. I felt like everything I did—all the activity, the writing, serving, speaking, studying—was about something other than Jesus. My life was more about *me* than Him. I was missing a theological truth that kept me in a prison of self-absorption.

I wanted importance and recognition.

I wanted love.

I wanted *something*.

When I read Ephesians 2:6, I thought about the word “seated.” I kept repeating, “I’m seated with Christ.” I imagined the security and sense of belonging that came with having a seat at the most important table in the universe with other Christians. How would that seated person live? What would it feel like to have a special place at God’s royal table?

I was not living as one who had a seat at the table.

I lived as one *fighting* for a seat at the table.

It was as if God said to me, “Heather, you can stop fighting so hard. You already have a seat at the table. You are already there. Everything you want for yourself is already true about you in Christ. Now start living like a seated person.”



Like me, many Christians miss this essential truth. We are missing a piece of a theological puzzle. We grasp that we are justified, forgiven, saved, sanctified, and redeemed. But *seated*? What does it mean? Why would the apostle Paul, in a historic moment when the church in Ephesus needed a precise understanding of the gospel, use this image and this verb instead of another?

I have spent decades trying to build up a theological vocabulary to understand who Jesus is and who I am in relation to Him. In all the years of learning in church settings and Christian communi-

ties, I never heard the word “seated” to tell me who I was.

Have you? Why have we missed this incredible word in Scripture? What I needed desperately to understand was this: I’m *seated*. I have a place at the greatest table the world has ever known. I belong. I’m in my seat, and I’m responding to specific instructions from the Lord about the “good works, which God prepared in advance” for me to do as promised at the end of Ephesians 2. The words in Ephesians 2:6 constitute a profound message of inclusion, identity, and calling.

Before that summer afternoon when I encountered Jesus afresh in the words of that letter to the Ephesians, I had served in vocational ministry for fifteen years. I was well-read, apparently strong in my faith, and fruitful in min-

istry. I had even studied the psychology of emotion for five years for my doctorate in English literature and received theological and ministry training. But the dark corrosion persisted; I was still fighting hard for recognition and belonging. I knew something was wrong because I lived in shame on the one hand—tormented by failure, inferiority, and worthlessness—and narcissism on the other—exalting and promoting myself. I compared myself to others and felt either jealous or superior. I was consumed with evaluating myself in a sickened effort to prove my worth, find belonging, and receive acknowledgment from audiences both real and imagined.

What did this drive to earn my seat at the table produce? Poor boundaries, people-pleasing behaviors, constant self-evaluation,

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disconnection, fear of failure, self-doubt, controlling behaviors, over-eating, a sense of entitlement, delusions of fame, shame, a lack of vulnerability, a judgmental and critical attitude, and an easily offended spirit. Despite ten years of managing these symptoms in therapeutic and spiritual settings, I never quite got to the root of my immature and narcissistic behaviors. I could theorize why I acted certain ways, but I could not articulate with any satisfaction how to change.

So I confessed more, prayed harder to be controlled by the Holy Spirit, and read bestselling Christian self-help books. It seemed, to the outsider, like I was healing. I was even asked to share all my wisdom with others in leadership seminars.

Ironically, it was the same summer afternoon I began writing a talk on emotional maturity for Christian leaders in ministry that Jesus intervened and led me to Ephesians 2. Instead of delivering a presentation to leaders on healthy boundaries and emotionally mature behaviors, I changed the speech to get at the core of what drives unhealthy behaviors.

Quite clearly, managing these unwanted attitudes and behaviors is not the goal. We have to ask why they begin in the first place. I wondered then if all of my immaturity sprang from one leak in my theological understanding: Could it be that I did not really *believe* I belonged, that I had a place, and that God had accepted me and invited me to sit down with Him in the heavenly realms? Instead of pursuing the goal of emotional well-being, I wrote in my seminar notes that the real goal was one thing alone:

The goal is intimacy with Jesus.

I was indeed missing something, or rather, Someone. It was Jesus.

The goal is knowing Him and being with Him in the heavenly realms. Everything flows from this.



Without this goal of intimacy with Jesus, seated with Him in the heavenly realms, I live as one trying to earn a seat at whatever table happens to mean the most to me in any given season of life. Here are my tables, which currently appear (and have appeared) in various forms. Do we share the same struggles? What are your tables?

- The smart person's table (I will earn the PhD, publish prolifically, and earn a seat with the prestigious professors).
- The thin and beautiful table (I will work out harder, diet more, buy new clothes, and consider new beauty treatments).
- The good wife and mother table (I will keep a clean home, prepare delicious meals, plan creative and intellectually enriching activities, and then blog every day to show how great we're doing).
- The published authors' table (I will write book after book and one day be honored).
- The fruitful Christian missionary table (I will serve till exhaustion and lead others to faith so I can be somebody to my church).
- The wealthy family table (I will just earn more money).
- The famous table (I will be known for *something*, anything).

Ephesians 2:6 dispelled the darkness inside of me. Jesus says I'm *seated* with Him. I have a place at the table. I can stop fighting to prove my worth. Because I'm seated at the table, I'm invited to gaze at the Head, Jesus Christ, and allow Him to set me free from

both self-exalting and self-condemning behaviors. I'm seated in a place that invites God's provision. I'm seated in a place that allows me to bear fruit for God's kingdom. I'm seated at a place where I belong—with Jesus and with other believers—and I won't ever have to battle loneliness, exclusion, or comparison again.

I felt like a warm balm had been applied to my heart.

I felt free from myself.

It seems so simple. It seems too easy and too good to be true.

But that's the gospel. That is exactly why Jesus Christ brings the best news the world will ever hear. A Savior has come to win a place for us and set us free.

We have a place at the table with Jesus.