INTRODUCTION
Sometimes it can feel like rules and regulations are only there to block us and interrupt our lives. Why would we want to set up rules that keep us from doing what we want? But, the truth is, if we aren’t diligent about creating and keeping guardrails, we set ourselves up for way more pain than any amount of fun is worth. And, establishing guardrails is something we have to make a decision to do. No one else can do it for us.

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ABOUT GOD
God is the one and only true God, yet He exists in Four persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God is the Creator, so everything belongs to Him and is under His control. God is holy, so He is righteous, majestic and loving. God is all knowing and purposeful, so He’s at work to bring about His will. No person, thing or idea compares to God.

ABOUT THE SCRIPTURES
God reveals Himself to us through the Bible, and it is 100% accurate, reliable and authoritative.

ABOUT PEOPLE
People are made in God’s image and for His pleasure. But everybody falls short of God’s intention, or ideal, for people. In other words, everyone has sinned. As a result, we are all separated from Him, even though He wants an intimate relationship with each of us.

ABOUT SALVATION
That’s why Jesus, God’s Son, came and lived on this earth, died and rose again. God offers His free gift of salvation to all who believe in Jesus and accept Him as Savior, the only way to be forgiven and reconciled to God. Anyone who accepts this gift is adopted as a son or daughter into God’s family and will live with Him forever in heaven.
We believe that the set, stage, music and everything in your room communicates a message—without you saying a word. That's why we put together a list of production ideas to help you set the stage for the session and the series. From the music you play when students come in the room to the worship set your band plays, we want to make sure that your room conveys “Guardrails” in a multi-sensory way. There is a downloadable checklist available in your series downloads that will give you all the elements for this session (and the entire series).

BACKGROUND PLAYLIST FOR GUARDRAILS SERIES
“We Didn’t Start the Fire” by Billy Joel (from Storm Front)
“Who Says” by Selena Gomez (from Who Says)
“Sweet Serendipity” by Lee Dewyze (from Live it Up)
“Something to Believe In” by Parachute (from Something to Believe in)
“I Just Wanna Run” by The Downtown Fiction (from Best I Ever Had)
“The Light Will Come” by Phil Wickham (from Cannons)
“Should’ve Said No” by Taylor Swift (from Taylor Swift)
“If It’s Love” by Train (from Save Me, San Francisco)
“Hold My Hand” by Michael Jackson featuring Akon (from Michael)
“I Run to You” by Lady Antebellum (from Lady Antebellum)
“Otherside” by MIKESCHAIR (from MIKESCHAIR)

WORSHIP PLAYLIST FOR GUARDRAILS SESSION 4
“Freedom Is Here” by Hillsong United (from Across the Earth: Tear Down the Walls)
“Your Love Never Fails” by Chris Quilala (from Jesus Culture: Your Love Never Fails)
“Glory to God Forever” by Fee (from Hope Rising)
“Holding My World” by Kristian Stanfill (from Move Mountains)
“Running” by Klaus (from Glory)

THE SET
Contact your county’s Department of Transportation to find out if you can get a hold of actual road guardrails to use on your set. If this isn’t feasible, you can go to a local salvage yard and see if you can find any there. You can also do a search on craigslist.com. Set up your guardrails on either side of the stage. Using yellow construction paper (or traffic tape, which you can find online) make cut outs of yellow squares to run down the middle of your room and up on to the stage to make your room into one big street. You can also get old car parts (lights, bumpers, fenders—the older and more beat up, the better) and put them on the inside of the guardrails. Make sure that somewhere within your set you incorporate the word “Guardrails”, like on a screen or monitor. Or you can use the traffic tape from the floor design to write the word “Guardrails” on the background of your stage.

SERIES ART
Art for PowerPoint backgrounds and for series promotional ads is available as a free download with every series. Visit the XP3 website, log on to your account and download the images to use in your presentation, newsletters and website.

VIDEO
A video bumper is available for the Guardrails series and was created to be used as an intro for all three sessions of the Guardrails series. You can purchase the video by logging into your XP3 account and clicking on the “XP3 videos” link.
MIDDLE SCHOOL ADAPTATION: GUARDRAILS

The following activities and illustrations will help middle school students (grades 6-8) connect with the subject matter in ways that engage them physically, mentally, socially and sometimes emotionally. You can also adapt the Guardrails series for middle school students by using the teaching outline found in this document to edit the teaching script to a 20-minute presentation. In addition, by using the separate middle school small group dialog questions (included with this product), you can make each section more middle school friendly.

SESSION 4 GAME: COPYCAT (Play this game as an icebreaker to Session 4.)
This relaxing and fun game works indoors or outdoors, and is better with a large number of people. Choose a student to be “it,” then have him or her leave the area. The other students then sit in a circle, with one person chosen to be the leader. They then start rhythmically clapping their hands in unison when the student re-enters the area. Once a rhythm has been established, the leader then secretly changes the rhythm using a series of different actions. This can be snapping their fingers, rubbing their tummy, stamping their feet, etc. As soon as the other students notice, they have to follow suit—hopefully as seamlessly as possible, without letting the chosen student see from whom they are receiving instructions. The idea is for the “it” student to figure out who is the leader—a much more difficult task than it seems. They have three chances to correctly identify the culprit before their turn is over.

SESSION 4 ILLUSTRATION: HUNGRY? (Use this illustration after teaching point “B” in the Tension section of the teaching script.)
[Note to Communicator: Set up a table at the front of your youth room with a tablecloth and a plate of about 20 hot dogs in hot dog buns. Be sure to have bottles of water and ketchup on the table, as well as some napkins. It might also be good to have a bucket on hand. Ask for some volunteers to come up (the more volunteers you choose, the more hot dogs you’ll need). Plan on having 5 hot dogs per volunteer, just in case. Give your volunteers two minutes to eat as many hot dogs as they can. Be sure to give them a countdown when the time is almost up, and get the other students to cheer them on.]

Every Fourth of July, the people of Coney Island, New York, gather for a momentous event to celebrate the independence of our great nation. They come together to eat hot dogs. Yep, I said hot dogs. The Original Nathan’s Famous Fourth of July International Hot Dog Eating Contest brings people from all over the world and sees men and women eat somewhere between 10–55 hot dogs and buns each.

[Note to Communicator: You can find YouTube videos of the hot dog eating contest by doing a search for “Nathan’s Famous Hot Dogs.”]

Now I know we’ve all had our moments of gorging on pizza, chips, candy and even hot dogs but could you imagine eating 55 of them? And here’s the even crazier thing: These people come back year after year and try to eat more than they did the previous year. Instead of saying, “I ate 55 hot dogs this year. That was amazing, and now I can retire my bib,” they start “training” to be able to eat even more!

(continued on next page)
Just like these super-eaters, we all have appetites in our lives. We usually hear the word appetite in reference to food, but it can also refer to our craving for money, popularity, sex or other things. Now some of you think that if you don’t have guardrails and just do whatever you want, you give yourself the ultimate freedom to live life to the fullest, to eat 55 hot dogs. But the problem is when you don’t put up guardrails, you end up with a massive stomach ache and, despite the pain, the desire to come back and eat 55 more the next year. In other words, refusing to have guardrails doesn’t solve anything but instead moves the temptation of your appetite a little bit closer to disaster. The problem is that no appetite is fully and finally satisfied, and the more you feed it, the more it grows. So instead of deciding to go all in and leave the guardrails behind, set up some healthy boundaries so you can enjoy the occasional hotdog and still be able to stand up and walk away when it’s all over.
The teaching script is divided into five sections.

**INTRODUCTION**
This introduction is intended to connect you, the communicator, to the audience usually through a personal story or observation. We’ve included our stories, but you may want to substitute your own story in this section.

**TENSION**
The tension moves the message from the “me” mentality of the introduction to a “we” mentality. For example, a transition statement might be, “At some point in our lives, we have all been jealous of someone over something.”

**TRUTH**
Once the tension builds, the next logical step is to uncover the truth of what the Bible says about the topic.

**APPLICATION**
At this point, the message moves to a “you” mentality in order to teach the application. The “you” is the student. Take God’s truth and unpack how it relates to each student so that he or she can apply it to everyday life.

**LANDING**
Here it is important to land the message on what each student needs to know and do with what they’ve heard. Just as the message began with a personal story or observation, the message also ends with a “me” mentality. For example, one possible landing statement might be, “I have a greater sense of purpose knowing that God created me in His image.” Leave the students with a clear sense of what all of you should do with what you’ve heard.
INTRODUCTION
Why don’t we want to create guardrails in our lives?
The problem with a guardrail is it keeps me away from something I want.

TENSION
We buck at the idea of guardrails because it means that we’re not having as much fun as we possibly could.

Regardless of whether you have guardrails or not, the tension that you feel is not going away.

Your temptation begins wherever you decide to put the brakes on.

And temptation is never going away.

TRUTH
In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar decided to conquer Israel.

He would take as captive the best and the brightest.
He would strip away all of their culture.
He brought with him Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table (Daniel 1:5 NIV).

They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king’s service (Daniel 1:5 NIV).

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself in this way (Daniel 1:8 NIV).

Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel (Daniel 1:9 NIV).

To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds (Daniel 1:17 NIV).

The king talked with them and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service (Daniel 1:19 NIV).

APPLICATION
To refuse to establish guardrails is not going to remove the tension.

Solomon says: The integrity of the upright guides them (Proverbs 11:3 NIV).

Future regrets can be avoided all together if you’ll establish some guardrails now.

LANDING
You know specifically the thing in your life that needs a guardrail desperately.
HOW TO CONTEXTUALIZE A TEACHING SCRIPT

The XP3 Students Team wants you to take our work and make it work within the context of your current student ministry. We encourage you to tailor an XP3 Students Teaching Script so that it directly speaks to your current church context, allows for the master teacher's personality to shine in and through the message and parallels the personal world and community of your students.

HOW TO DETERMINE THE LANDSCAPE OF YOUR YOUTH GROUP

• Who are the student clusters in your ministry?
  Typically a student cluster is a homogeneous group of 5-10 students who act, behave, talk and dress the same. Understand what they love to do, eat, listen to and watch. What type of student clusters gather at your church (athletes, artistic types, Emo, etc.)? How many different student clusters come to your church? What student clusters will you initially target when you teach?

• Identify your youth ministry distinctive.
  What makes your youth group different? What does your youth group tend to focus on? What does your youth group do well? What traditions are a part of your youth group (baptism, communion, weekly dinner)? What makes your youth group remarkable? What does your youth group offer?

HOW CAN EVERY XP3 STUDENTS BOTTOM LINE CONNECT WITH THE MISSION, UNIQUENESS AND VALUES OF YOUR STUDENT MINISTRY?

HOW TO FIND YOUR OWN VOICE: THE MASTER TEACHER’S STYLE

1. Embrace your uniqueness. God made you. Be yourself! Don’t try to pretend to be Andy Stanley or Reggie Joiner or Jared Herd when you teach. Your students need you to be you.
2. Know your strengths and weaknesses as a speaker. Have a few of your adult volunteers give you constructive feedback on your delivery.
3. Tell your own stories. Rely on your experience in order to personalize the message. Allow your students to get to know you through your storytelling.
4. Pray and be confident. Thankfully God gave us His Holy Spirit to empower all ministers of the gospel. God doesn’t leave His communicators alone on stage.

HOW TO SPEAK TO THE STUDENTS’ REAL NEEDS: THE STUDENTS’ SOCIAL SCENE

1. Define the top issues that are transpiring in your student ministry.
   a) Think through the five social areas students live in: family, school, church, friends and extracurricular activities (sports, theater, clubs, band, etc.).
   b) Observe, talk to and survey students. They will tell you their needs.
   c) Feel free to cruise social media in order to gain an understanding of their world.
2. Directly speak to students’ needs by adapting the Application and Landing sections of the teaching script. It may be more productive to deal contextually with your students’ needs rather than sticking to the script verbatim. Granted, your students will deal with application in small group, but it is helpful to at least speak to their real needs from the stage. Speaking generally about their issues helps them process faster when asked in small group.
3. Highlight top issues in the Tension section of the teaching script. It can be helpful to add to the tension by using current issues your youth ministry is experiencing.
INTRODUCTION
A. When we started this series a few weeks ago, we asked what our lives would look like if we created and established guardrails. What would it look like to have moral guardrails? What would it look like to have guardrails that would help with our sexuality, our friendships or any other area of life? What would it look like if we were to establish some guardrails that kept us back from the edge of disaster? And we came up with our own definition of a guardrail to help keep us on track. Here's the definition we’ve been using: A guardrail is a standard of personal behavior (meaning you make these up yourself) that becomes a matter of conscience. The matter-of-conscience part is a little bit tricky. It’s the idea that you would create a standard in a particular area of your life where you would say, “This is as far as I’m going to go.” And you would make this decision so personal that when you violate or begin to violate your own personal standard of behavior, your conscience would light up and say, “Warning! Warning! Warning! You’re moving toward something dangerous!” It’s a personal standard of behavior that nobody else may subscribe to, a personal standard of behavior that you’re so committed to that you actually feel guilty when you begin to violate your personal standard. And the reason we create these standards of behavior, these guardrails, is to keep us away from disaster.

B. Culture baits us to the edge of disaster morally, relationally, sexually. Then we step over certain lines, and people say, “Oh, you’re gross. You’re disgusting. Ugh.” So the question is, how do you manage that? We’ve said that if we establish some guardrails we can better protect ourselves from getting to that place. We’ve talked about friendships, moral guardrails, sex; we’ve talked about all kinds of stuff. Today as we wrap up, I want to address the big push back to all of this. I want to talk specifically about why we don’t want to create guardrails in our lives, because chances are if you’ve been in on this series, you’ve had one of two thoughts running in your mind. One thought is, “I hope my best friend is listening. I hope my younger sister is listening. I hope everybody’s listening because it just makes sense that in order to keep from screwing up our lives in just about any area you can think of, we need some guardrails, some things to keep us back from the edge of disaster.”

The other thought is, “I don’t want to do this. I’m not going to do that. Yeah, it makes sense, and I can’t argue with the logic. You didn’t even need the Bible to make this point. This is sort of common sense. Yeah, I got it. But the problem with a guardrail is it keeps me away from something I want. I don’t want to be a good example; I just want to continue on in the friendships I have. I don’t want to be wise and prudent; I just want to date her. I want to date him. I don’t want to study; I want to make an A, and there’s a way to make an A without studying. So guardrails are actually just in my way. They get between me and what I want.”

TENSION
A. That’s the push back. That’s what I want to talk about. For many of you, you’ve enjoyed this series; it’s been kind of fun. But then you’ll just walk out of here and do what you want and what you’ve always done. The reason is not because the logic we have talked about here is flawed. Otherwise you wouldn’t be hoping all your friends and all the people you love are paying attention. What we have been saying the past couple of weeks makes sense. But the problem is, when it comes to you and when it comes to me, the
reason we buck at the idea of guardrails for ourselves is because the whole idea of stepping back means there are things between where I am and where I shouldn’t be that I’m missing out on; I’m not having as much fun as I possibly could. I’m not quite as close to sin as I possibly could get without actually sinning. I’m leaving some stuff on the table. I’m leaving some experiences unexplored. And honestly, guardrails sound great for other people but I’m just not going to do it.

So if you’ve had those thoughts or you’ve already wandered in that direction, I want to point you to two things you already know, and then I want to tell you a story from the Bible.

B. Here are the two things you already know. If you decide to forget the guardrail thing—if you are thinking, “Forget it, I’m not doing it; I’ll miss out on too much; I’d rather live on the edge”—here’s the thing you need to know: Regardless of whether you have guardrails or not, the tension that you feel is not going away. Let me explain. If you decide, “You know what? I know that I shouldn’t sleep with my boyfriend because it is wrong and all sorts of things could come from it, but I still really want to and there is nothing you can say to stop me,” eventually you will deal with the emotional—and possibly the physical—pain of your decision. Because we all agree that out there are some lines we shouldn’t cross, whether morally, relationally or in other areas, but we may not agree on where those lines are. So the problem is that when you do decide to put on the brakes, that is, where you will experience a point of tension. That’s where your temptation begins. Your temptation begins wherever you decide to put on the brakes. And temptation is never going away. The tension is never going away. If you decide, “I’m going to get off the diet I’ve been on, and I’m just going to eat whatever I want to eat,” the temptation is going away—for right now—but instead there is a new point of tension.

Refusing to have guardrails does not eliminate the tension or the temptation—it may move the tension or temptation, but it doesn’t get rid of it. All it does is erode your resolve. All it does is bring you to a later point of temptation that if you were to give into, would find you with far greater consequences.

Refusing to have guardrails doesn’t solve anything; it doesn’t fix it. It just moves the battle line a little bit closer to disaster. Let me say this in a different way, a way I’ve said it before: Your appetites are never fully and finally satisfied. In other words, you never have a meal to end all meals. You never have a dessert to end all desserts. You never buy shoes, jeans or a phone to end all shoes, jeans or phones. You never have a kiss to end all kisses. No appetite you have is ever fully and finally satisfied. In fact, and you may not know this, the more you feed an appetite, the more it grows. What satisfied you before won’t satisfy you next time. It just gets bigger and bigger and more and more demanding.

C. So whatever the thing is—whether it’s shopping or eating or anything really—every time you feed this appetite, you are never fully satisfying it for good. It comes back, and it wants more. And what you need to know is that it will always be this way. That will never change. So it is in knowing and understanding that appetites will always be around that we need to ask ourselves a question. If the appetite won’t go away, if the temptation will never go away, what does wisdom say we should do? What does common sense say? If moving closer and closer to the line only feeds an appetite, what do we do instead?

You create a guardrail. And this is why guardrails matter. Because you draw a different line of tension and you draw it back far enough that the appetite is far more manageable as opposed to feeding it and letting it become so powerful that it controls you.
My point is this. If you think that a guardrail keeps you from good things like having fun, that it makes your friends not understand what you’re doing and it seems like too extreme a thing to implement in your life, you just may be in danger of deceiving yourself. Be careful that you don’t deceive yourself into thinking that by saying yes, yes, yes you’ll never have to say no. Because wherever you say no, wherever you decide to put a line—and a line will go somewhere—that’s where your temptation begins. And all I’m saying, because I love you, is that the farther back you stay from certain lines, the farther back you create some guardrails, the easier it will be for you to resist. And win.

TRUTH
A. Now I want to tell you a story. This story took place in 605 BC—and the fact that we know anything that happened that long ago is amazing. This particular story is in the Bible, but it’s also substantiated by secular history. In 605 BC, a king named Nebuchadnezzar who lived in what is now modern-day Iraq decided to conquer Israel—specifically the city of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar was a brilliant guy. When he went into a major metropolitan ancient city, instead of just destroying the city and enslaving everybody, he gave his commanders specific instructions. He told them to go into the city and take captive all the members of the royal family. And this was brilliant because the members of the royal family were the best and the brightest. They were generally the best educated. They were generally the prettiest, the ones who had eaten well, the ones who were the most well off in a society. So Nebuchadnezzar would tell his men to arrest the best and the brightest and take them back to his capital city in Babylon. He did this every time they captured a city, so before long the prettiest and the smartest people in the world started to fill his capital city. And once he had these people there he would put them in a training program. He would slowly strip away their culture and replace it with Babylonian culture. Sneaky, right? Little by little, bit by bit, Nebuchadnezzar made Babylon a city full of brilliant scholars and beautiful people, and slowly he started to conform them to a Babylonian culture and worldview—in some cases even sending these people back out into the world to export Babylonian culture themselves.

So in 605 BC this is what happened: Nebuchadnezzar sent his armies into Jerusalem and conquered the city. He pretty much destroyed the temple Solomon built, the holiest place in the Jewish culture, and looted it. He took all the valuables from the temple and brought them to Babylon, enriching himself with Israel’s gold, and he also brought with him Israel’s best and brightest. Four of the people he brought with him are Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So Nebuchadnezzar got these guys, in addition to other people from all over the world, and began this training process with the goal of stripping away their heritage and their belief systems and creating new Babylonians who would be the brightest in the world.

B. Here’s how the story begins in Daniel 1:5: The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table (NIV). This was awesome! They got to eat the best food in the empire and were to be trained for three years. This was like being in college with a food allowance that came right off the king’s table. Most of the captives who found themselves in this program thought they were going to die in the desert or have to work in the salt mines or the copper mines. But these guys had it relatively good, living in the king’s palace, eating the king’s food and getting an education.

Verse 5 continues: They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king’s service (NIV). So after their three years they were going to be quizzed, and the best and the brightest of this group would actually get to work for the king and live in the palace. This is as good as it could possibly get in the ancient world!
But Daniel, one of these smart guys from Jerusalem, saw right through the whole plan. Mainly because they didn’t just spare his life when they took him to Babylon. Once there, they gave him a new set of clothes, they shaved his head, they pierced his ear and they assigned him a new name. They called him Belteshazzar—taking the word for the Babylonian god Bel and attaching it to another word from their language. So Daniel, a good, religious Jewish boy, now had a name that meant something like “Bel will watch over you” or “Bel will take care of you” or “Bel is your defender.”

Daniel understood that slowly they would begin to strip away everything he believed, everything he knew, everything he had placed his faith in, and one day he would wake up and be Babylonian through and through, worshiping Babylonian gods, taking part in Babylonian ceremonies, viewing all the different gods as the one true god and having left behind everything he knew and believed as true.

C. See, Daniel recognized something that many of us miss when it comes to the ebb and flow of culture. Daniel understood that each of the little things Nebuchadnezzar was doing was not a big deal in itself. Compromise may not have seemed that terrible. But he knew compromise does not erase the tension—it only weakens our resolve. We think if we give in we won’t have that tension or temptation anymore. Daniel knew better than that. If you cheat once, it’s way easier to cheat a second time. Once you compromise with drugs or alcohol, it’s just easier the second time. The tension doesn’t go away when you cross the line; it’s just that your resolve is lessened.

Daniel saw this, and he realized, “They’ve changed my clothes, they’ve changed my name, they’ve changed my habits and they’ve changed my schedule. I realize where this is going. One day I will have completely abandoned everything I’ve held near and dear.” So Daniel decided on something that I want to encourage all of us to do. Here’s what the Scripture says: But Daniel resolved . . . (Daniel 1:8 NIV). Another way to say this is, Daniel made up his mind. He said, “Enough is enough. That’s as far as I go. That’s as close as I get.”

Verse 8 goes on: But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way (NIV).

D. Now, there’s a lot of speculation about why Daniel didn’t want to eat the food or drink the wine. One reason could be that this food and wine had been offered to one of the Babylonian gods, and to eat this food would be to acknowledge that these gods existed. Another explanation is that Daniel was Jewish and didn’t know if this food was kosher. He knew he’d be violating the Mosaic Law, so he didn’t want to eat it. No one knows for sure what happened, but we know that Daniel decided this was as far as he would go.

What’s so cool about this is Daniel made up his mind before he knew how his story would end. And this is the part that we can’t even imagine because we’ve never been in this environment—Daniel was a teenager away from home, surrounded by the most powerful people in the world. By saying no, he could even lose his life. In fact, two different times he used the word defile to describe what the king’s food would do to his body. What an insult!

Daniel made a decision before he knew the end of the story. But let me tell you why he made this decision before knowing how the rest of it would unfold. He made this decision because he could predict the end of the story if he didn’t make the right decision. He made this decision because he could predict where this was heading. So he made up his mind.
He asked the chief official, Ashpenaz, for permission. He went to Ashpenaz and said, “My guys and I don’t want to eat this food and drink this wine.” Look at this next verse; this is kind of the game-changer for everybody. It says: Now God . . .

E. Here’s why this is so important. As you are evaluating your guardrails you may be thinking, “If I do this, am I going to miss out? Are people going to think I’m crazy?” As you are evaluating your guardrails, you’re going to think about your life and your future and what people are going to think and what you’re going to miss out on, and you may forget to factor in the part that Daniel somehow knew to factor in. It’s called the “Now God” part.

The “Now God” part is that God will use your guardrails not just to protect you but to direct you. What happens from this point on because of Daniel’s resolve is the thing God used to direct his entire life. If he had not made this decision there would be a book named Daniel missing from the Bible. Everything you can possibly imagine hinged on his decision whether or not to eat the meat and drink the wine. When he said no, God said, “This is a defining moment, and I’m going to use this decision to define your entire future.”

You would be shocked at the number of Christians I know who would say, “You know what? God became the most real to me and I’ve felt the most direction from God in my life, not over praying ‘God, show me Your will for my life,’ but in a moment of temptation, a moment of trial, a moment of tension when I recognized where I had drawn the line and put up the guardrail. This is as far as I’m going to go.” And they’ve looked back and seen that that decision was the decision where God completely redirected their career, their academic pursuits, their friendships. They would say, “I wasn’t trying to make a directional decision. I was just really trying to make an ethical or moral decision, and God just used that not only to protect me but to direct me.” This is what happened with Daniel.

Let me tell you what I know about you for absolutely sure. You have no idea what hangs in the balance of your decision to establish guardrails for your life. You think you do, but you don’t. My hunch is that for many of you, the decision of how you work, how you take care of your body, whatever it is—that decision for many of you will be a defining moment. And you’ll look back on it and say, “God didn’t simply just protect me; I feel like He also directed or redirected my entire life because I made up my mind.”

F. Let’s read the rest of that verse: Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel (Daniel 1:9 NIV). And Daniel didn’t know this. Ashpenaz was kind of leaning into Daniel and his friends and treating them special—even though he didn’t know that God had done something special behind the scenes. So Daniel went to Ashpenaz and said, “We can’t eat this stuff.” And Ashpenaz said, “Well, this is the problem. I can’t give you an out on this. I can’t let you off the hook. You’ve got to eat this meat and drink this wine. I understand your conviction, but if I change your diet, if I make an exception and your health fails, the king’s going to have my head. I’m responsible for your health, and I know that young guys do better if they eat a lot of meat and drink a lot of the king’s wine. I can’t change my mind, as much as I’d like to.”

Now the Bible doesn’t tell us this part, but it implies that there’s some kind of wink-wink going on. Ashpenaz said, “But look, your security guard over there, maybe you can work it out with him.” So Daniel and his friends go over to the security guard and say, “We talked to Ashpenaz and he said no, but he thought maybe since you’re the security guard . . .” and Daniel presented his deal. He said, “Give us 10 days. Let us not eat the meat and drink the wine for 10 days. If our health has deteriorated, then we’ll talk. But just
give us 10 days.” So somehow Ashpenaz and the security guard work it out, and they give Daniel and his friends 10 days. And after 10 days, they were healthier than the rest of the guys who did eat the meat and drink the wine. And they were smarter than the rest of the guys.

Here’s how the story ends: To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds (Daniel 1:17 NIV). God honored this decision. And here’s the conclusion: The king talked with them and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service (Daniel 1:19 NIV).

And this was the beginning of a journey that made a difference in the nation of Israel, the book of Daniel, the lions’ den, the fiery furnace—all of these. You’ve probably heard these stories, but it all began with this amazing story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. It all started right here with a simple decision to say, “You know what, I can’t stretch any farther. That’s as far as I go. I’m going to make up my mind before I know the end of my story because if I don’t make up my mind I have a feeling I know what the end of my story will be.”

APPLICATION

A. Now here’s the challenge for you and for me. You’ve just got to make up your mind to do this. To refuse to establish guardrails is not going to remove the tension. It’s just going to erode your ability to say no. You already know that. You’ve just got to make up your mind. You’ve got to make up your mind before you know the end of your story. Because if you don’t, you can predict the end of your story, at least in some areas of life. Your friendships are moving in a bad direction. Your school responsibilities are being neglected. Your ethics in terms of your honesty and integrity are starting to be compromised. At some point, as you predict your own future, it really comes down to whether or not you are going to make up your mind.

You’ve got to resolve in your own heart, “You can cut my hair, you can give me new sandals and teach me a new language, but that’s as far as I go.” Because not having guardrails doesn’t remove the tension, it just moves the line of where the tension is going to be.

B. I want to share this verse from Proverbs and then we’re done. This verse summarizes this whole idea. Solomon says: The integrity of the upright guides them (Proverbs 11:3 NIV). You have no idea what God wants to do with and through you. You don’t. And when I look at you, I think, “Wow, look at their potential. She’s a junior in high school—I wonder what God will do with her? He’s brand new at that school. I wonder what God would do with him if he walked in with a different set of standards. Even though everybody talked about him behind his back, he’s now in a perfect position to be used by God.” I look at you and wonder what God might do with you because of your potential. But I’m telling you—you’ll never know until you do what Daniel did—make up your mind and say, “You know what, culture? In this area, this is as far as I go. That’s it.” And I’m telling you, God will use that ethical/moral decision to direct, potentially, your entire life. But you’ve got to make up your mind.

Here’s the thing. For the most part we’ve already agreed that some of our greatest regrets would have been avoided if we’d had guardrails. Do you know what that means? That means future regrets can be avoided altogether if you’ll establish some guardrails now. You’ve got to make up your mind. Like Daniel, you have to resolve in your heart what’s too far for you regardless of what anybody else says.
LANDING
A. I want that for you so much. And I know for some of you this seems so extreme. As much as it sounds like common sense when I’m talking about it, when you go home and start trying to figure it out in your own life, it just seems so drastic. But I believe with all my heart that God will honor those decisions. And God will establish you in your crazy, mixed-up school and your crazy, mixed-up culture and your crazy, mixed-up neighborhood and your crazy, mixed-up friends. God will establish you as the person through whom He will bring change in those crazy, mixed-up environments just like He did with Daniel. But you’ve got to make up your mind and refuse to be deceived by the lie that the tension and the temptation will go away if you ignore this. The only thing that goes away without guardrails is your resolve. And on the other side of those decisions, your life just gets more complicated.

B. So my prayer for you is that you will make up your mind. I want to give you a moment to contemplate and think because for some of you, there’s a battle going on. You know specifically what the thing is for you—the thing in your life that desperately needs a guardrail. And I’m hoping that maybe in our remaining time together in small groups, you would make the Daniel decision. That you’d just make up your mind and do what you know in your heart you need to do to be in a place where God not only can protect but possibly direct or redirect your entire life.

[TRANSITION INTO SMALL GROUPS]