• 4) Guardrails: Once and For All

• Daniel 1:5-19

• We are finishing up this 6-part series.
• Essentially, we’ve taken the idea of a guardrail and built a spiritual principle out of it.
• A guardrail is a system designed to keep vehicles from straying into dangerous, or off-limit areas.
• We all know what a guardrail is.
• The guardrail is actually placed in an area that’s safe to drive to keep us from going into places that are unsafe to drive.
  o A guardrail is always placed a few feet or a few yards away from the area of danger.
  o Guardrails are designed to cause a little bit of damage in order to keep you from experiencing a lot of damage.
  o We all know that on the other side of guardrails are places that we shouldn’t go.

• So, we asked the question a few weeks ago: What would it look like to create guardrails or to establish guardrails in other areas of our lives?
  o What if we were to establish some guardrails that kept us back from the edge of disaster, whatever that might be?

• So, we came up with our own definition, and here’s the definition we’ve been using.
• A guardrail is a standard of personal behavior (which means you make these up yourself), that becomes a matter of conscience.

• And the matter of conscience part is a little bit tricky.
  o The idea is that you would say, “In this area of my life, this is as far as I’m going to go.”
  o And you would make that decision so personal that when you violated it or began to violate your own personal standard, your conscience would light up and say, “Warning, warning, warning! You’re moving towards something dangerous.”

• The thing we’ve said every single week is this (and this is never going
to change), **our culture baits us to the edge of disaster in several areas, and then mocks us once we step over certain lines.**

- Today as we wrap up, I want to address one more thing.

- I want to tell you a story. 605 B.C. is where this story happens.
  - It’s amazing we even know what happened in 605 B.C.
  - This is amazing.
  - This is in the Bible, but it’s also substantiated by secular history.
- It’s 605 B.C. and a king you’ve heard of named Nebuchadnezzar, who was located in modern day Iraq, (in fact Saddam Hussein sort of wanted to be the next Nebuchadnezzar and sort of modeled and styled himself after Nebuchadnezzar—you may not have known that) Nebuchadnezzar, 605 B.C. decided to conquer Israel, and specifically the city of Jerusalem.

- Now Nebuchadnezzar was a brilliant guy, and here’s one of the things that made him so brilliant.
  - When he would go into a major metropolitan ancient city, instead of just destroying the city and enslaving everybody, he gave his commanders these instructions: Go into the city and arrest and take captive all the royal family, the best and the brightest, because the royal family was generally the most educated.
    - The royal family was generally the prettiest.
    - The royal family was generally the people who had eaten well and had taken care of themselves and been taken care of.
  - Go into the city and take as captive the best and the brightest, and bring them safely back to my capitol city, Babylon.

- And so Nebuchadnezzar had the habit of importing the prettiest people in the world and the smartest people in the world into his capitol city, then he would put them in a training program and he would slowly strip away all of their culture and replace it with Babylonian culture.
  - So, his capital city of Babylon, back in this period of ancient history, was a magnificent city, full of brilliant people, the
brightest scholars in all the world, and the prettiest people, because he would destroy their cities, try to destroy their civilizations—but he would import the best and the brightest, re-create a culture within them, change their worldview, and, in some cases, send them back out to export Babylonian culture.

- It was brilliant.

- So, in 605 B.C. he sends his armies into the city of Jerusalem, conquers Jerusalem, goes into the temple, the ancient temple that Solomon had built, pretty much destroys the temple and loots it, takes all the things that are valuable, and brings them to Babylon.
  - He enriches himself with Israel’s gold, and he brings with him Israel’s best and brightest.
  - And four of these people that he brought with him are very famous people you’ve heard of.
  - Daniel is one; the other three are Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.
    - They were part of this entourage that he captured and brought to the city of Babylon.

- So, he gets these guys with all these other people from all over the world, begins this training process, and the goal, again, is to strip away all of their heritage and all of their belief system and create new Babylonians that, again, are the brightest people in the world.

- Here’s how the story begins.
- Daniel 1:5 (NIV)
- 5 The king [That’s King Nebuchadnezzar, as part of his training program] assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table. [Which was awesome. This is like, wow, this is the best food in the empire we get to eat.]
- They were to be trained for three years.

- This was graduate school.
  - This was, you thought you were smart before, you’re getting ready to get your Ph.D.
  - You’re going to get your Master’s degree.
  - We’re going to give you a three year free, all paid for college education, with a food allowance that comes right off the king’s
In other words, most of the captives who found themselves in this program were high fiving each other going,
- Oh, my word!
- We thought we were going to die in the desert.
- We thought we were going to die like our parents and grandparents.
- We thought it was over for us.
- We thought we were going to work in the salt mines, the copper mines.
- We’re going to live in the palace, eat the king’s food, and they’re going to educate us.
- This is unbelievable.

- Daniel 1:5 (TNIV)
  - 5 They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter into the king’s service.
- So, after they finished their three-year program, they would have an oral exam, 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, who was one of these smart guys, was so smart he saw through the whole plan, and he saw the end game, and he realized what was about to happen.
  - Because once they rescued his life, they gave him a new set of clothes, they shaved his head, they pierced his ear, and they gave him a new name.
  - In fact, Daniel’s name was actually Belteshazzar.
    - They took a Babylonian god, Bel, and attached it with part of their language, and it meant something like Bel will take care of you, or Bel will watch over you, or Bel is your defender.
    - They gave him a brand new name.

- Daniel realized what was happening—that slowly, slowly, slowly they were going to begin and continue to strip away everything he believed, everything he knew, everything he had placed his faith in.
  - And one day he would wake up and he would be Babylonian through and through, worshipping Babylonian gods, taking part
in Babylonian ceremonies, viewing Marduk, or Bel, or all the different gods as the god, and having put in his past everything he grew up believing was true.
- And he realized they were going to do this very, very slowly over time.

- Daniel recognized something that many of us completely miss when it comes to the ebb and flow of culture.
  - Check this out.
  - Here’s what he knew that we missed: that compromise does not erase the tension, it only weakens our resolve.
    - **Compromise does not erase the tension.**
      - We think, Oh, if I give in, I won’t have that tension anymore.
      - Oh, if I give in, I won’t have that temptation anymore.
      - Oh, if I give in, I won’t have that pressure anymore.
    - Daniel knew better than that—that compromise does not erase the tension; it only weakens our resolve.
      - If you cheat once, it’s way easier to cheat the second time.
      - Once you compromise with alcohol or recreational drugs, it’s just easier the second time.
      - Come on, that second cigarette is way easier than that first cigarette.
    - There are so many lines, that once you cross them, the tension doesn’t go away, 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 held near and dear.
  - And so Daniel decided to do something that I want to encourage all of us to do.

- Here’s what the Scripture tells us.
- Daniel 1:8 (NIV)
- 8 But Daniel resolved
Another translation says, “Daniel made up his mind.”

- Enough is enough—that’s as far as I go.
- That’s as close as I get.
- That’s as far as you’re going to be able to push me.

Daniel 1:8 (TNIV)

8 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.

There’s a lot of speculation about why Daniel didn’t want to eat the food or drink the wine.

- One is that this wine and food had been offered to Marduk or to Bel or one of the Babylonian gods, and to eat this food would be acknowledging that those gods exist, so by eating this food or drinking this wine it would be like saying we believe these are real gods, and he thought they were pagan idols; so that may be one reason.
- Another explanation is that he’s Jewish and he didn’t know if this was kosher, and he knew he would be violating the Mosaic law and the teachings of Moses, and so he didn’t want to eat it.
  - There are several variations on that theme, but what we know is this: that he decided, you can push me and push me, but this is as far as I go.
- And what’s so cool about this—because if you grew up in Sunday school, you know how this story ends.
  - It ends pretty good for Daniel.

This is the challenge for you and for me: Daniel made up his mind before he knew how his story ended.

- Daniel made up his mind, and he hadn’t read the book of Daniel.
- And see, this is the part we can’t even begin to imagine, because we’ve never been in this environment.
- He’s a teenager away from home, surrounded by the most powerful people in the world.
- By saying no, he’s essentially going to lose his life, and here’s the amazing thing.

He uses—two times—he uses the word defile.
Imagine what an insult this was to his host; to eat your king’s food is to defile my body.

- Hey, hold on, Cowboy.
- You know there are some people in this city who don’t have anything to eat.
- We’re offering you the best there is, and you think it’s going to defile your body?
- Well, aren’t you somebody special?
- This was a total insult to Nebuchadnezzar and his entire household.
- He’s not going to defile himself.

He made a decision before he knew the end of the story, but let me tell you why he made this decision before he knew the end of the story.

- He made this decision because he could predict the end of his story if he didn’t.
- He made the decision because he didn’t know the end of the story; he made the decision because he could predict the end of his story.
- Because he, like you and like me, he knew where this was leading, and so he made up his mind.

So, he asked the chief official for permission.

Here’s what he did: He went to Asphenaz. (as-fen-as)

- He said, “Asphenaz, look, me and my guys, me and my posse, me and my boys, we don’t want to eat this food and drink this wine, and I know this is going to be a problem, but we just don’t want to do it.”
- Now, look at this next verse.
  - This is kind of the game-changer for everybody.
  - Look at this.

Daniel 1:9 (NIV)

9 Now God

- Now, here’s why this is so important.
- You see, as you’re evaluating your guardrails and—Am I going to do this?
  - I’m going to miss out.
  - People are going to think I’m crazy.
• The guys at work are going to go…What?
  • But you always did this before.
• You’re not going to go there anymore, you’re not going
to drink anymore—however this lands for you.
  o The problem is, as you would think about your life, and your
future, and what people are going to think, and what you’re
going to miss out on—all that kind of stuff that goes through
your mind, here’s the part that you forget to factor in.
  o And here’s the part that somehow Daniel knew to factor in.
    ▪ **It’s called the “Now God” part.**

• The “Now God” part is that **God will use your guardrails to actually
  not simply protect you, but to direct you.**
  o Because what happens from this point on in this story, because
of Daniel’s resolve, because he made up his mind—this is
amazing, you can read the rest of the story yourself—his
decision to kind of draw a line in the sand was the thing God
used to direct his entire life.
  o If he had not made this decision, we wouldn’t be telling this
story.
  o There would be a missing book of the Bible called Daniel.
    ▪ It wouldn’t be there.

• Everything, more than you can possibly imagine, hung or hinged on
his decision whether or not to eat the meat and drink the wine.
  o The fact that he said no—God said, “This is a defining
moment.”
    ▪ I’m going to direct your entire future by this decision.
  o And do you know what I’ve discovered in my own life and in
talking to so many other people?
    ▪ You would be shocked at the number of Christians I
know who would say, “You know what, Pastor?”
    ▪ God became the most real to me and I felt the clearest
direction 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 where I decided, in
this area of my life, this is where I draw the line.
    ▪ This is as far as I’m going to go.
    ▪ And they look back and they would say, “That is the
decision God used to completely redirect my career, my
academic pursuits, and my friendships.”

- “I would’ve never met my wife.”
- “I look back, and I wasn’t trying to make a directional decision. I was really just trying to make an ethical or moral decision and God used that decision not only to protect me, but to direct me.”
  - And Daniel had no idea that that’s what hung in the balance of the decision.

- Let me tell you what I know about you for absolute 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.
  - And my hunch is that for many of you, that decision—whether it’s how you work, how you manage people who are married, whether it’s a money thing—that decision, for many of you, will be a defining moment, and you will look back and say, God didn’t simply just protect me (guardrails are all about protection). I feel like God directed or redirected my entire life because I made up my mind.”

- Let’s read the rest.

- Daniel 1:9 (NIV)
  - 9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel.
    - And Daniel didn’t know this.
    - But he realizes Asphenaz is kind of leaning into these guys.
    - Asphenaz is kind of treating these guys special, and he didn’t know that God had done something behind the scenes just like you don’t know what God is going to do behind the scenes.

- And so he goes to Asphenaz.
  - He says, Look, me and my guys, we don’t want to eat this stuff and drink this wine.
  - And Asphenaz says, “Okay, here’s 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 and if I make you an exception and
then your health fails, the king is going to have my head. I’ll be responsible. 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. So I can’t change my mind, as much as I like you guys.”

However, and the Bible doesn’t tell us this part, but apparently there was some kind of wink-wink thing going on, he said, “Look, but your security guard over there, maybe you can work it out with him, wink, wink.”

• So, Daniel and his guys go to the security guard and say, “We’ve talked to Asphenaz and he said no, but he thought maybe” … And so the security guard and Daniel, they came up with a deal.
  o Daniel says, Look, give us ten days.
    ▪ Just let us not eat the meat and drink the wine for ten days.
    ▪ Just give us ten days.
    ▪ If our health has deteriorated, then we’ll talk, but just give us ten days.
  o Somehow Asphenaz and the security guard work it out, and they give Daniel and those guys ten days, and after ten days they’re healthier than the rest of the guys.
    ▪ They’re smarter than the rest of the people.

• Here’s how the story ends.
• Maybe you know this part.

• Daniel 1:17 (TNIV)
  17 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.
  o God honored this decision.
  o Then here’s the conclusion.

• Daniel 1:19 (TNIV)
  19 The king [Nebuchadnezzar] talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service.
• And this was the beginning of a journey that would end up making all kinds of difference in the nation of Israel, the book of Daniel, the lion’s den thing, the fiery furnace thing.
  o You’ve heard all those stories.
  o It all began, and this amazing story that happens with Nebuchadnezzar that most people don’t know about, it all started right here with a simple decision to say, “You know what—we can’t stretch any further.”
    ▪ That’s as far as I go.
  o 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 the end of my story.

• Now, here’s the challenge for you and for me.
  o You’ve just got to make up your mind to do this.
  o And to refuse to establish guardrails, it’s 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.
  o If you don’t, you can kind of predict in some areas of your life, the end of your story.

• If your marriage is moving in a bad direction…
  o Your finances are moving in a bad direction…
  o Your relationship with your son or daughter is moving in a bad direction, because you won’t draw a line in terms of how much work you work and how many days of the month you travel…
  o At some point, as you predict your own future, and for many of you it’s not that difficult, it really comes down to, are you going to make up your mind?

• Let me just go ahead and tell you.
  o You know this.
• Culture is not going to help you.
• Culture is going to continue to bait you in the wrong direction.
  o You’ve got to resolve in your own heart: you cut my hair, you
give me new sandals, 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 to where the tension is going to be.

CLOSING
• I want to share this verse from Proverbs, and we’re done.
  o This verse kind of summarizes.
  o Check this out.

• Solomon said this,
• Proverbs 11:3 (NIV)
• 3 The integrity [That’s to do the right thing] of the upright [the people who are trying to do the right thing]

• Look at this word: guides them.

• Here’s the thing: I look at you and go, Wow! Imagine what God might do.
  o But I’m telling you, you’ll never know.
  o You’ll never know until you do what Daniel did, and make up your mind.
  o You know what, culture, in this area, that’s as far as we go.
    ▪ That’s it.
    ▪ I’m telling you, God will use that ethical moral decision to direct possibly your entire life, but you’ve got to make up your mind.

• Here’s the thing.
  o We’ve already agreed for the most part that some of our, if not all of our greatest regrets would have been avoided if we’d had guardrails.
  o Do you know what that means?
  o That means future regrets can be avoided altogether if you’ll establish some guardrails.

• But it really comes down to this: You’ve got to make up your mind.
• Like Daniel, you have to resolve in your heart—That’s it for me, regardless of what anybody else says.
And I want that for you so much.
  - And I know for some of you this seems so extreme.
  - As common sense as it sounds when I’m talking about it, when you go home and start trying to figure out in your own life, it just seems so extreme.
    - But I believe with all my heart God will honor those decisions.
    - And God will establish you in your crazy, mixed-up industry, and in your crazy, mixed-up culture, and in your crazy, mixed-up neighborhood with your crazy mixed-up friends—God will establish you as the person through whom he will use 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 by refusing to make up your mind, somehow the tension and the temptation is going away.
  - 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.
    - So, my prayer for you is that you make up your mind.