

PART 1

I WILL BE READY

No one deliberately plans on making careless, impulsive decisions that lead to pain, injury, disappointment, shame, and broken relationships. But when you fail to prepare for how to defend your weaknesses and overcome temptation ahead of time, you set yourself up to fail. You must be prepared when temptations come knocking. As you begin preparing for future temptations, you can choose to eliminate many of them by deciding right now how to remove yourself from the front line of battle. By pre-deciding that you will be ready, you prepare for victory with a firm foundation of truth. Here are the key principles you will learn in part 1:

- No one plans to mess up their life—but they also don't plan *not* to.
- It is not a sin to be tempted; it becomes a sin when you decide to act on temptation.
- By pre-deciding to be ready when you face temptation, you take a stand against the enemy.
- You tend to think you're stronger and can handle more than you actually can.
- Making up your mind how to respond before the moment of temptation arrives helps you move the line between you and what tempts you.
- You have the power to resist future temptations by choosing to eliminate them right now.
- Boundaries based on God's guidelines are not limiting—they're freeing.

LESSON 1

MOVE THE LINE

Instead of being unwise, unaware, and unalert, we are making up our minds to be ready for the moment of temptation. We are pre-deciding to move the line.¹

CRAIG GROESCHEL

Erica Calderon, a thirty-something mother of two young daughters in Phoenix, lost eighty-five pounds by “moving the line” in two strategic areas of temptation.² She realized that coming home at the end of a long day left her tired and hungry and willing to eat whatever was available. So she began doing herself a favor by planning and cooking dinner ahead of time. Throwing together a nutritious meal left to simmer in a slow cooker all day, Erica knew she had something healthy and delicious already waiting for her. She moved the line of satisfying her appetite with fast food or whatever was available by making sure something better was ready.

Erica’s other method of moving the line was to not watch television in her kitchen. “Sometimes, I’ll go upstairs to watch my shows instead of sitting in the living room, which is attached to the kitchen. That way, I’m less likely to scavenge.” Erica knew that adding distance would make it less likely for her to stop her television viewing and start snacking.³

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Sounds like an obvious, commonsense approach, right? Nonetheless, whether with healthy eating or other lifestyle choices, we often fail to anticipate where the line between a good choice and a less-than-good choice falls. So, we end up feeling our way toward that boundary, often going over the line and wondering why we couldn't stop ourselves.

When we're drawn to something or someone, we often ignore the line until it's too late. We see how close we can dance on the edge between wrong and right. We know we don't want to yield to temptation, but we skate along the border, assuming we can control ourselves and rely on willpower to pull us back. Rarely, however, do we find the strength to resist. Instead, we must learn to move the line so that we can keep a healthy distance between ourselves and what tempts us.

- How do Erica's strategies for healthier eating habits strike you? Can you relate to her way of anticipating her needs ahead of time to provide better options?
- When have you wanted to change a habit or pattern of behavior in your life most recently? What choices did you make to help you attain your goal?
- How difficult is it for you to look ahead at the consequences of your choices and work your way back to the decision right in front of you? What complicates your ability to see the connection between present decisions and future success?
- When have you moved a line by anticipating your threshold of temptation and intentionally distanced yourself? Did this help you resist temptation?

EXPLORING GOD'S WORD

As you explore how to make better choices by pre-deciding, you will find it helpful to consider your usual decision-making process and the default ways you often respond to stress, tension, conflict, and temptation. You know you want to make good choices that honor God, help you grow, and contribute to your overall physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health. Knowing what you should do, however, is rarely the issue. Instead of focusing simply on what you know would be good for you, it's helpful to identify what interferes with your ability to act on what you know.

Three of the most powerful categories blocking your ability to think ahead and make good decisions include feeling overwhelmed by too many options, yielding to fear about making bad choices that result in painful consequences, and allowing other emotions to disrupt your decision-making ability. Knowing how these obstacles get in your way allows you to strategize ways to think ahead and remove them before you're in the heat of the what-do-I-do moment.

We will explore each of these three barriers and how to overcome them in more detail, but before your deep dive into decision-making, allow yourself to take a deep breath, calm your mind, and still yourself before God. He knows your heart better than you do and wants to help you grow and be the divine image-bearer he created you to be. Inviting his presence into your process makes a huge difference in your perspective and attitude. With this goal in mind, make the words of the psalmist your prayer:

¹ You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.

² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways. . . .

²³ Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

PSALM 139:1-3, 23-24

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- What word or phrase stands out or speaks to you in this passage? Why does it resonate?
- Why does the psalmist begin by acknowledging, “You have searched me, LORD,” and then closes by asking, “Search me, God, and know my heart”? How does inviting God into your process help you become more self-aware?
- What thoughts or emotions stir inside you as you reflect on how intimately God knows you? Guilt? Shame? Relief? Gratitude? Something else?
- What do you believe has contributed to most of the bad decisions you’ve made in the past? Why?



EMBRACING THE TRUTH

Asking God to search you and know your heart also increases your ability to see your weaknesses and areas of vulnerability. Not only does the Holy Spirit allow you to see your struggles beyond what’s visible to your eyes, but you also surrender your defenses and humbly face what’s true about how you’ve arrived at where you are in your life right now.

Your past mistakes, the decisions you regret, and your emotional baggage don't have to prevent you from making better choices and from experiencing positive change. You can ask God to help you decide now what you will do later, when circumstances blindsides you or emotions overwhelm you. With God's help and guidance, your choices from this point forward can be different from the choices made by default in the past.

It's easy to make false assumptions and reach faulty conclusions based on your history of not always making the best decisions you long to make. You might get stuck in your head, telling yourself, "Yeah, it's always been this way. I always seem to repeat the same mistakes. I'm too old to change. I don't have the strength or energy to change. This is just who I am and the way things will always be."

But this self-fulfilling message does not reflect the truth of what God says: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" (Isaiah 43:18-19).

It's never too late to experience change in your life when you rely on God. You can partner with him in making the changes he wants you to experience by making different decisions. Based on his Word and wisdom gained from your experience, and led by the Holy Spirit and supported by some key trustworthy people in your life, you can go in a different direction. You can break default systems that feel ingrained and hardwired.

When you pre-decide how you will face future temptations based on the truth of who God says you are and the goodness of who he is, you align with his will. But this process of change is a collaborative effort: "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans" (Proverbs 16:3). When you decide now what you will do later, with God's help, you will determine your course of action before the moment of decision.

- How often do you catch yourself falling into the "I can't change" trap? How do you usually feel when this false message pops up in your mind?

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- Do you usually consider yourself someone who is quick and confident in making decisions or someone who needs time and deliberation to think through all possible outcomes? How has this style of decision-making worked for you?
- How has God revealed to you that he wants to help you change the way you make decisions? How have you experienced his help in this endeavor already?
- What do you need to surrender to God in order to move the line and pre-decide how you will avoid and resist temptations?



CHOOSING HOW YOU CHOOSE

As you've likely experienced, pre-deciding that right thing to do would be easy enough if unpredictable variables didn't get thrown into the mix. In particular, we struggle when we're so tired of making decisions—usually called “decision fatigue”—that we would rather just give in without considering what we're doing and what the consequences will be.

Let's say you're trying to eat healthier and feel better in your body. You especially want to avoid too much sugar and caffeine, along with artificial ingredients that often hurt your body. Setting this goal, you know you should pack a healthy lunch at home to take with you for your day, but you're always so rushed to get out the door, you rarely pre-decide.

When you don't bring your lunch, you can either eat out, have something delivered, or snack on what's available. You don't have time to stop working to go out to eat, and it's too expensive to do so every day. So you default to what's

available . . . chips and a soda from the office vending machines. Without pre-deciding a specific healthy lunch strategy, you set yourself up to cross the line.

There's also the fear of making a bad choice and suffering the consequences. The barbeque plate at the café down the block sounded like a good splurge until you realized you spent ten bucks in order to have heartburn the rest of the day. Plus, you didn't realize the ingredients in the special sauce must have included the very items you're trying to avoid—ones that upset your stomach.

Unexpected curveballs also wreak havoc with both your appetite and your options. When your boss wants a same-day turnaround on a big report, when you discover a coworker's been gossiping about you, when you spill coffee in your lap, your emotions respond accordingly. Resentment, betrayal, and frustration leave you feeling angry, hurt, and annoyed. You deserve something to help you feel better—maybe one of those donuts in the break room? Okay, because it's been such a tough day, maybe two.

Identifying the impact these three variables usually have on your daily decisions can help you rethink what you need to pre-decide. So for each category—decision fatigue, decision FOBI (fear of blowing it), and decision disrupters—answer the following questions as you assess each one's ability to hijack good decisions and push you closer toward the line.

DECISION FATIGUE: TOO MANY CHOICES, TOO MANY OPTIONS

- Which daily or regular decisions do you get tired of making? Why do you think they tend to drain your energy?
- When do you recently recall feeling overwhelmed by having to make a mundane decision? What contributed to your feeling overwhelmed prior to that moment?

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- When have you avoided making a positive change—such as starting a workout program—because you dreaded the decisions involved?

DECISION FOBI (FEAR OF BLOWING IT): TOO MANY WORST CASES, TOO MANY UNCERTAIN OUTCOMES

- When making regular daily decisions, do you tend to stick with what you know works? Or do you like to try new options and enjoy some variety?

- When do you recall avoiding a decision because you were afraid you might make the wrong choice? Assuming you might make a wrong choice, what did you assume to be the consequences?

- Based on your history of making choices, what's your expectation bias? Do you assume you will usually experience positive results, or do you tend to jump to worst-case scenarios?

DECISION DISRUPTORS: TOO MANY CURVEBALLS, TOO MANY EMOTIONS

- Would your family and friends describe you as usually calm and steady or, more often, passionate and unpredictable?
- What role do you allow emotions to play in the decisions you make on a daily basis? Do you tend to base even mundane decisions—what to wear, what to eat—on logic and reason or on feelings and moods?
- What pushes your buttons and causes you to feel overwhelmed by a surge of emotions? When have you made a bad decision—or failed to decide at all—because your feelings got in the way?

DETERMINING YOUR DECISIONS



When you don't know exactly where the line falls, you don't recognize it until you've crossed it. "Oh, I guess I shouldn't have watched that movie with the romantic scenes in it. Even though there was nothing erotic or pornographic depicted, the situations still caused me to go to a certain place in my thoughts and imagination. A place where my decisions don't honor God or reflect who I want to be." With experiences such as this, you realize the line can easily become blurry. You thought you knew the border between black and white, right and wrong, tempting and sinful, only to discover a gray zone.

Or here's another example. If you battle alcoholism, you probably know it's not a good idea to work as a bartender or cashier in a liquor store. Why expose yourself to such blatant temptation, right? But finding the line that provides a safety buffer between you and what you're pre-deciding to avoid may be harder

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to discover. You might not realize the culture in a particular workplace until you're thrown into its midst. Suddenly, your boss throws a cocktail party, or your business hosts a wine-and-cheese event for a new client. Again, black and white seemed clear at first until you're thrust into a gray situation.

So based on what you read in chapters 1.1 through 1.3 in *Think Ahead*, as well as your responses so far in this first workbook session, let's practice identifying some of the lines you need to move. For example, if you want to avoid staying up too late and not getting enough sleep, you might identify the line as going to bed at 10 PM. But as you consider why this doesn't always work, you decide to move the line and stop watching Netflix an hour before bed, using that hour as a time to relax by reading or listening to calming music. Okay, now it's your turn:

Temptations to avoid	Where the line has been	Where to move the line
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

LESSON 2

PLAN YOUR ESCAPE AND KNOW YOUR WEAK SPOT

When you get into a situation and suddenly everything gets dark, God promises to light up his exit for you, your sign to safety. To live a life of pre-decision, we learn to look for his signs before the lights go out.⁴

CRAIG GROESCHEL

If you fly often enough, you eventually get used to the preflight safety presentations required before takeoff. You know, the spiel about what to do in the unlikely event of an emergency, including how to maintain the flow of oxygen so you can keep breathing. While no one likes to think about the possibility of crashing when they fly, knowing what to do in the event of such an emergency can save your life. In particular, knowing the location of the nearest exit row greatly enhances your odds of survival.

In a recent study by Professor Ed Galea of the University of Greenwich, results revealed “that sitting within five rows of an emergency exit will drastically improve your chance of survival.”⁵ Galea studied configurations of the seating charts from more than 100 plane crashes. He also interviewed nearly 2,000 surviving

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passengers and more than 150 crew members aboard those flights. Based on both analytics and interviews, Galea concluded that the majority of survivors only had to move within five rows of their assigned seat in order to reach an exit row and escape. More than five rows and the likelihood of survival dropped.⁶

Similar studies have shown that knowing your nearest exit in public spaces, particularly the location of stairs and fire escapes, also saves lives. Obviously, locating a route of escape requires paying attention and knowing your own location in relation to what's around you. If you have physical limitations, you must also factor those into your exit strategy.

The same is true for escaping the magnetic pull of temptation. You need a predetermined plan for how to avoid crossing the line into sinful behavior. And in order to have an effective plan, you must know your weaknesses and limitations.

- How often do you fly in your current season of life? How closely do you pay attention to the preflight safety instructions?

- When you fly, do you usually make a mental note of the exit row nearest your assigned seat? How often do you locate the nearest exit when you're in a church, theater, or other public venue?

- Do you usually consider worst-case scenarios and plan how you would respond? Or are you more inclined to hope for the best and take your chances?

- When you think about the areas where you struggle with making good choices, what kinds of escape routes have you used in the past? How effective were they?

EXPLORING GOD'S WORD

You've likely recognized the passive-aggressive approach employed by the enemy when he is tempting you. Before you give in, the devil assures you that it's not a big deal, that everybody does it, that you're the only one you can count on to meet your needs. After you give in, he's the first accuser eager to shame you and magnify the impact and consequences of what you've done. Overall, the enemy likes to feed you lies about who you really are (an overcomer through the power of Jesus) and who God is (your loving Father) and the gift inside you (the Holy Spirit).

All the more reason to focus on what God says is true.

And what God's Word tells us is that we can overcome the enemy in the moment of temptation. Practically speaking, we can use our awareness of our weaknesses to move the line and protect ourselves. We can plan ahead and predetermine an escape plan to avoid being hijacked by temptation. In the collected wisdom of Solomon, we see a clear contrast: "A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences" (Proverbs 27:12 NLT).

You're not a simpleton, or you wouldn't be reading this and trying to change. You're ready to change how you approach areas that typically ensnare you and pull you over the line. You're preparing before you're in trouble so you can be ready to stand firm in your faith. Which means it's time to get serious about wearing spiritual armor and planning your escape.

¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

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¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

EPHESIANS 6:11-17

- Whether you're familiar with this passage or it's relatively new to you, what comes to mind when you think of putting on "the full armor of God" in order to resist "the devil's schemes"?
- Which defensive item stands out to you here? Why do you suppose you might especially need it right now?
- As you consider how to prepare for when you will be tempted in ways that target your weaknesses, how do you stand firm according to this passage?

- How does your faith provide a shield for anything the devil can throw at you? How does the sword of the Spirit cut through the lies, deception, and accusations of the enemy?

EMBRACING THE TRUTH



Sometimes it's challenging to know how a metaphor applies to you and your life in practical ways. Putting on the full armor of God may fit this category and cause you to wonder what it looks like for you. Perhaps the place to begin is simply recognizing the purpose of armor as a way to protect your vulnerable areas.

For centuries, warriors have used protective garments and defensive weapons to survive in battle. These specialized tactical pieces were often made of metal, wood, and stone—whatever was available and able to withstand blows from combat. While soldiers donned entire suits made of chain mail or forged iron by the Middle Ages, such comprehensive armor also limited mobility. Instead, many stuck with the tried and true—gear designed specifically for the most vulnerable body parts, such as the head, chest, groin, and feet.

This is the strategy implied in Ephesians. The belt of truth keeps you grounded and protected from the lies of the enemy—false assertions designed to throw you off-balance and harm your most vulnerable parts. Metal breastplates typically covered the pecs and chest to protect the heart and prevent penetration from a sword, dagger, knife, or club. The breastplate of righteousness then reminds us that our salvation has been secured by what Jesus did on the cross—not by our own efforts or ongoing merits. Rather than heavy boots, the gospel of peace provides an unshakable foundation of supernatural security that ensures you're ready for any and all circumstances.

The shield of faith blocks the direct assaults from the enemy while the helmet of salvation guards your mind with the assurance of God's unconditional love and grace. The sword of the Spirit, identified as God's Word, slices through illusions, delusions, deceptions, and darkness. Putting on all these pieces ensures

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you're prepared to resist injury and ready for any battle you may face, allowing you to "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Ephesians 6:10).

- How often do you prepare to resist the devil's schemes by utilizing the spiritual armor and weaponry available to you? What do you risk if you wait until you're in the midst of temptation or spiritual warfare before using this armor?

- Would you agree that basically all of these pieces of spiritual armor are forged by the truth of God's Word? How does immersing yourself consistently in his Word keep your armor intact?

- Which specific areas of your life seem most vulnerable to you right now? How can you utilize the armor of God to protect yourself and to avoid and resist temptation?

- How does relying on this supernatural armor prevent you from thinking you're strong enough on your own to overcome temptation? How does it help you pre-decide what you need in order to remain victorious over sin?

CHOOSING HOW YOU CHOOSE

Even if you understand how the armor of God can keep you ready for winning the battle over temptation, you might still wonder how to personalize it. You might assume that putting on spiritual armor amounts to doing what you already know or have been told to do—pray daily, study the Bible, meditate on God's truth, follow the example set by Jesus. While these spiritual practices do reinforce your armor, you can still personalize how you protect your most vulnerable areas and points of weakness.

Rather than simply repeating what you've been doing, what if you linked your spiritual disciplines with the weaknesses you're protecting? For example, let's say you want to limit the amount of time you spend on social media, knowing how it often causes you to waste time comparing yourself to others, feeling isolated, and making you feel as if you're missing out on all the great things everyone else on Instagram and TikTok seem to be doing. Perhaps you're unable to unplug completely from social media because you need access for work and like to stay connected to family and friends in distant places.

So perhaps tailoring a belt of truth to your personal needs involves noticing the triggers that lead you to compare and come up feeling insecure and less-than. Identifying these catalysts for comparison might allow you to avoid some of them altogether. And instead of continuing to scroll and drool over your friend's beautiful family and their latest vacation, maybe you hit pause and realize how this triggers envy and insecurity in you. As soon as you realize the possibility for comparison, you can focus instead on who you are in Christ—a beloved child of God, a forgiven co-heir with Jesus, a temple for the Holy Spirit, an overcomer.

Rather than simply assuming you're putting on a "one size fits all" belt of truth, you cinch it to the truth you need most to keep you grounded and

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protected. Now that you've got the idea, go through these pieces of armor and specify how you can customize them, using them to help you pre-decide strategies, protect your weaknesses, and escape from sin by avoiding temptations.

Item of armor	Purpose	Customized for you
Belt of Truth		
Breastplate of Righteousness		
Gospel of Peace		
Shield of Faith		
Helmet of Salvation		
Sword of the Spirit		

DETERMINING YOUR DECISIONS

When tempted in the heat of the moment, we often feel like we have no choice, like we don't have enough strength, energy, or willpower to resist the allure of what's before us. Whether it's looking at certain images online, hitting the PayPal button on a favorite retail site, opening the container of chocolate gelato before bedtime, or visiting the new craft brewery that just opened, we can't wait until those opportunities are right in front of us.

Before we expose ourselves to potential temptation, we must remember these words from Paul:

God is faithful, so He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:13 NASB

Knowing God provides a way of escape from every temptation, we can think ahead and plan how to dodge the pull we feel once we're tempted. With this strategy in mind, we can protect ourselves in areas where we're particularly vulnerable.

Reread chapter 1.6 in *Think Ahead* and then review your answers for the questions at the end of part 1 on page 67. If you dodged being honest about what you know causes you to struggle, then now is the time to come clean. Consider ways you can not only move the line but avoid it altogether. That might mean choosing not to be alone in certain situations. Or taking a different route home from work. Or not traveling away from home overnight without safeguards such as having your spouse or a trusted friend accompany you.

Honesty is imperative, though, for your escape plan to work. No one else needs to see your answers unless you decide to share them with others you trust for purposes of support and accountability. Which, in fact, is one of the most powerful ways to plan your escape route—with the help of others. Bringing your struggles into the light and acknowledging them takes away so much of their power. Plus, you enlist others who can check on you, encourage you, and pray for you.

So think about the temptations that hold the most appeal for you, and then come up with at least one feasible plan of escape the next time you are aware that it's near.

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Temptation	My weakness it targets	My escape plan
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

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