Decision Making and the Will of God, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: The Will of God and the Way of Wisdom

Proverbs 3:5–8

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This opening lesson carries the doctrinal weight for the entire study, so it is worth teaching slowly and laying the foundation with care. What is at stake here is nothing less than how a Christian understands "the will of God." Many believers have absorbed, often without examining it, the idea that God has a secret, detailed, individual blueprint for each life, and that the spiritual task is to discover that hidden plan through signs, feelings, fleeces, open doors, and inner promptings. Proverbs 3:5–8 cuts a different and far healthier path. It teaches the way of wisdom: trust in the Lord, refusal to lean on mere human cleverness, glad acknowledgment of God in every area of life, and the fear of the Lord as the starting point of every sound decision. The teacher should be ready to draw a clear and gracious distinction between God's revealed will (His moral will, made plain in Scripture, which we are to know and obey) and God's sovereign will (His secret purposes, which govern outcomes and are not given to us to discern in advance).

It is just as important to name, kindly but plainly, the two ditches on either side of this road. On one side lies a mystical, sign-seeking approach that treats every decision as a hunt for hidden revelation and leaves the believer anxious, passive, and superstitious. On the other side lies a self-reliant, prayerless decision making that leaves God out entirely and trusts only human calculation. Proverbs steers between them. We are to use our renewed minds, gather wisdom, and act responsibly, and we are to do all of it in humble dependence on the God who has spoken and who reigns. Help students feel the relief in this. The God of the Bible is not hiding the ball. He is a Father who delights to lead trusting children along a path He has already lit with His Word.

Beyond the doctrine, this lesson is aimed squarely at the heart. The fear that drives sign-seeking is, at bottom, a fear that God cannot be trusted with our future, and the self-reliance that crowds God out is, at bottom, a pride that thinks we do not need Him. Both are matters of the heart, not merely the intellect. The teacher's deeper aim is to form students into people who actually trust their heavenly Father, who rest in His providence, and who walk forward in courageous wisdom rather than paralyzed superstition. Send them home not just with a better theology of guidance, but with a quieter, more confident, more childlike trust in the God who holds their steps.

Question 1

Student Question:

Solomon begins, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding" (v. 5). What does it mean to trust God with the whole heart in a decision, and how is that different from simply ignoring our own thinking? Why does Scripture set trusting the Lord over against leaning on our own understanding rather than over against using our minds at all?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by helping students feel the full weight of the phrase "with all your heart." In Hebrew thought the heart is not merely the seat of emotion; it is the center of the whole person, including the will and the mind. To trust the Lord with all the heart is to bring our entire inner life, our hopes, our fears, our reasoning, and our deciding, under His care. It is a settled posture before it is ever a particular choice. The decision maker who trusts this way starts from a different place than the anxious one: not "How do I keep from ruining my life?" but "My Father can be trusted, and He is leading me."

Notice carefully what Solomon contrasts with trust. He does not say, "Trust the Lord and do not use your understanding." He says, "do not lean on your own understanding." The word leaning is the key. To lean on something is to put your whole weight on it, to make it the thing that finally holds you up. The warning is not against thinking; Proverbs is a book that prizes thinking, planning, and counsel from beginning to end. The warning is against making our own limited, fallen, shortsighted reasoning the foundation we rest everything on. God gave us minds and expects us to use them, but our minds were never designed to bear the weight that only God can bear.

This is the place to correct a common misreading. Some sincere believers have taken "lean not on your own understanding" to mean that thoughtful, reasoned decision making is somehow unspiritual, and that the truly faithful course is to switch off the mind and wait for a mystical impression instead. That is the opposite of what the verse teaches. The contrast is not between thinking and not thinking. It is between two foundations: self at the center, or the Lord at the center. A believer can reason carefully, weigh options, seek counsel, and study Scripture, all while leaning the full weight of his trust on God rather than on the cleverness of the process.

Press the point home pastorally. Many people in the room have made decisions in one of two unhealthy ways: either by white-knuckled self-reliance, gathering every spreadsheet and trusting their own analysis to guarantee the outcome, or by a passive spirituality that refuses to decide until a feeling arrives. Proverbs offers a third way. Engage your God-given mind fully, and rest your heart fully on God. That combination, a working mind and a trusting heart, is the way of wisdom we will return to in every lesson of this study.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The biblical meaning of the heart as the center of mind, will, and affections, not merely emotion

- The difference between using the mind and leaning the whole weight of our trust on the mind
- Trust in the Lord as a settled posture that precedes and shapes particular decisions
- A correction of the error that thoughtful, reasoned decision making is unspiritual
- The Lord, not self, as the proper foundation of every choice

Discussion Prompts

- What is the practical difference between using your mind in a decision and leaning the full weight of your trust on it?
- Where have you seen self-reliant decision making fail, and where have you seen passive sign-waiting fail?
- What would it look like, this week, to bring a real decision to God with both a working mind and a trusting heart?

Question 2

Student Question:

Bring to mind one area of your life where you tend to lean hardest on your own understanding, perhaps money, romance, career, or your children. What would actually change about the way you handle that area this week if you trusted the Lord there with all your heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question turns the truth of verse 5 inward, and the goal is honesty rather than information. Everyone leans somewhere. The areas where we feel most competent, most experienced, or most afraid are usually the very places we are least likely to trust God and most likely to trust ourselves. Often it is the strong, capable, successful members of a congregation who quietly run whole regions of their lives on self-reliance, simply because they are good at them.

Help students locate the specific area without shame. For one person it is money, where a lifetime of careful management has slowly become a quiet confidence that the spreadsheet, not the Lord, secures the future. For another it is romance, where loneliness presses so hard that trusting God feels like a luxury they cannot afford. For another it is parenting, where love for a child curdles into anxious control. Naming the area is the first step toward bringing it under the lordship of Christ.

Then move toward the constructive half of the question. Trusting God in a specific area does not mean becoming careless or passive there. It means continuing to act wisely while consciously taking the weight off our own shoulders and placing it on God. It may mean praying before deciding rather than after, opening the Scriptures on the matter, seeking counsel we would normally skip, or simply confessing, “Lord, I have been carrying this alone, and I give it back to You.” The aim is one concrete, trusting step in the very area where self-reliance has ruled.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-reliance most often hides in the areas where we feel most capable or most afraid
- The difference between trusting God and becoming passive or careless
- Good gifts (money, relationships, children) quietly asked to bear the weight only God can bear
- Bringing a specific region of life under the lordship of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- In which area of life do you find it hardest to trust God, and why that one?
- What does anxious self-reliance look like in that area, in practical terms?
- What is one trusting step you could take there this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Verse 6 says, "In all your ways acknowledge him." What does it mean to acknowledge God in all our ways, and how is that different from acknowledging Him only in the obviously religious parts of life? How does a believer bring an ordinary decision, like a purchase or a schedule, under the lordship of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The word translated "acknowledge" means far more than a polite nod toward God. It carries the sense of knowing Him, recognizing Him, and reckoning with Him as the real and present Lord of the matter at hand. To acknowledge God in all our ways is to live as though He is actually there in every part of life, because He is. The decisive phrase is "in all your ways." Not some ways. Not the religious ways. All of them.

Help students see how naturally we divide life into sacred and secular compartments. We acknowledge God on Sunday, in prayer, in the obviously spiritual moments, and then quietly run Monday through Saturday as if those belonged to us. Proverbs will not allow the split. The Christian who acknowledges God in all his ways brings the budget, the calendar, the job, the friendships, and the small daily choices into the light of God's presence and lordship. Nothing is too ordinary to be brought under Christ.

Make this concrete, because it can sound abstract. Acknowledging God in a purchase might mean asking whether this spending honors Him and serves others, rather than only whether we can afford it. Acknowledging God in a schedule might mean asking what kind of person these commitments are forming us into, rather than only whether the calendar fits. The point is not to paralyze every small choice with agonized deliberation, but to cultivate a heart that instinctively reckons with God in everything, so that His lordship quietly shapes the ordinary.

Tie this back to the lordship of Christ, which is central to the New Testament. Jesus is not merely Savior of our souls and absent from our schedules; He is Lord of all of life. Romans 12:1 calls us to present our whole selves, our bodies and our days, as living sacrifices. To acknowledge God in all our ways is simply to live out the confession that Jesus is Lord, not only of the church building, but of the carpool, the inbox, and the checkbook.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The full meaning of acknowledging God: knowing, recognizing, and reckoning with Him as present Lord
- The false division of life into sacred and secular compartments
- The lordship of Christ over the whole of life, not merely the religious parts
- Bringing ordinary decisions (money, time, work) consciously before God
- Living the confession that Jesus is Lord in practical, daily terms (Romans 12:1)

Discussion Prompts

- Which parts of your week do you most easily treat as your own rather than the Lord's?
- What would it look like to acknowledge God in your spending or your schedule this week?
- How do we reckon with God in everyday choices without becoming anxious or paralyzed?

Question 4

Student Question:

Is there a corner of your life that you have quietly fenced off from God, treating it as your own business rather than His? Name it honestly. What would it look like to tear down that fence and invite Him into that very area this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the truth of verse 6 into the tender places. Almost every believer keeps at least one fenced-off corner, an area where, if we are honest, we would rather not have God's full involvement. It may be a habit we are not ready to surrender, a relationship we know He would question, a financial practice we keep in the shadows, or an ambition we are afraid He might ask us to lay down.

Lead gently here, because shame shuts people down while honesty opens them up. The fence usually goes up not out of open rebellion but out of fear: fear that if we hand this over, God will take away something we love, or ask something we are not ready to give. Naming the fenced-off corner is itself an act of trust, a way of saying that we believe God is good even in the area we have been guarding from Him.

Then turn to the invitation. Tearing down the fence rarely means a single dramatic act; more often it begins with one honest prayer that finally includes the off-limits area, one conversation

with a trusted brother or sister, one small obedience in the very place we have kept God out. The goal is not to manufacture guilt but to extend the lordship of Christ, joyfully, into the one corner where we have been quietly resisting it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fenced-off areas almost every believer keeps from God
- Fear, not just rebellion, as the root of our resistance to full surrender
- Honest naming as an act of trust in the goodness of God
- Extending the lordship of Christ into the specific area we have guarded

Discussion Prompts

- What is one area you have quietly treated as your own business rather than God's?
- What fear keeps the fence up around that area?
- What single step would begin to invite God into it this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

The promise of verse 6 is that the Lord "will make straight your paths." What does this promise actually mean, and what does it not mean? Does a straight path guarantee an easy or trouble-free road, or is God promising something deeper about where the path finally leads?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is an important question for guarding students against a popular misreading. Many people hear "he will make straight your paths" as a promise that if they trust God, life will go smoothly, doors will open conveniently, and obstacles will melt away. When the road then turns rocky, they conclude either that God failed them or that they must have missed His will somewhere. The verse promises something better and more durable than a smooth ride.

To make a path straight is to make it level, direct, and leading truly to its destination, removing the crookedness that would cause a traveler to wander or get lost. The promise is that God, for the one who trusts and acknowledges Him, will direct the course of life toward its right end. It is a promise of guidance and ultimate arrival, not a guarantee of an easy journey. Joseph's path ran straight to the saving of many lives, but it ran through a pit, a false accusation, and a prison cell along the way.

Help students hold this in tension with the rest of Scripture. The same Bible that promises straight paths also promises tribulation in this world (John 16:33) and tells us that through many hardships we enter the kingdom (Acts 14:22). A straight path is not a painless one. It is a path that, under God's faithful direction, actually gets the trusting believer where God means for him to go, often through trials that God Himself uses for good (Romans 8:28).

Bring this to bear on decision making. Because the promise is about God's faithful direction and not about guaranteed ease, a believer does not need to read every hardship after a decision as a sign that he chose wrongly. A closed door, a setback, or a season of difficulty is not automatically God saying "you missed it." The trusting believer can walk forward in wisdom, confident that the God who promised to direct his paths is doing exactly that, even when the road is hard.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The meaning of a "straight" path: level, direct, truly arriving, not necessarily easy
- A correction of the prosperity-style misreading that trust guarantees a smooth road
- God's faithful direction held together with the promise of tribulation (John 16:33; Acts 14:22)
- Hardship after a decision is not automatic evidence of having missed God's will
- Confidence in God's providential direction even through difficulty (Romans 8:28)

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you been tempted to read a hard road as proof that you chose wrongly?
- How does it change things to know God promises faithful direction rather than an easy journey?
- How can the church encourage someone walking a straight but difficult path?

Question 6

Student Question:

When have you found yourself waiting for a sign, a feeling, or an open door to tell you what to do, instead of asking what the wise and God-honoring choice would be? What did that waiting do to you, and how might the way of wisdom have served you better?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites honest reflection on the sign-seeking habit that Proverbs gently sets aside. Most believers have at some point stalled out, waiting for a feeling to drop from heaven or for circumstances to arrange themselves into an unmistakable message, while a perfectly wise and God-honoring choice sat in plain view the whole time. The waiting often feels spiritual, but it can quietly mask fear, indecision, or a desire to avoid responsibility for the choice.

Help students see what the waiting does to a person. It tends to produce anxiety rather than peace, because signs are ambiguous and feelings shift with the weather. It can lead to passivity, where good opportunities pass by while we wait for certainty that Scripture never promised. And it can become a way of dodging accountability, since a decision blamed on a sign feels safer than a decision we must own as our own wise and prayerful choice before God.

Then point to the better way. The way of wisdom asks a clearer question: given God's Word, sound counsel, my circumstances, and prayer, what is the wise and God-honoring thing to do? That question can actually be answered, and answering it forms maturity. Encourage students to recall a time when they finally stopped waiting for a sign, made a wise decision in faith, and discovered a peace that the endless searching never gave them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sign-seeking as a habit that often masks fear, indecision, or avoidance of responsibility
- The anxiety and passivity produced by waiting for ambiguous signs and shifting feelings
- The maturity formed by asking and answering the question of the wise, God-honoring choice
- Owning our decisions before God rather than outsourcing them to signs

Discussion Prompts

- When have you waited for a sign while a wise choice sat in plain view?
- What did that waiting do to your peace and your sense of responsibility?
- What helps you move from waiting for a sign to seeking the wise, God-honoring choice?

Question 7

Student Question:

Verse 7 warns, "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil." How does the fear of the Lord serve as the starting point for every good decision, and why is being "wise in your own eyes" such a dangerous place to make decisions from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Proverbs returns again and again to the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10), and here it stands at the center of sound decision making. The fear of the Lord is not cringing terror; it is reverent awe, a deep and humbling sense of who God is and who we are before Him. It is the posture of a creature before the Creator, a child before a holy Father. Every good decision begins here, because only a heart that reckons with God will submit its choices to Him.

Set this against being "wise in your own eyes." The person who is wise in his own eyes has quietly made himself the highest court of appeal. His own judgment is the final word; his own perspective is the measure of reality. Scripture treats this as spiritually dangerous, because self-assured wisdom is precisely the condition in which a person can no longer be corrected, instructed, or warned. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Proverbs 14:12). The danger is not that such a person makes no decisions, but that he makes them cut off from the only One who sees the whole picture.

Notice how verse 7 ties the fear of the Lord to turning away from evil. The two belong together. A genuine reverence for God always expresses itself in a moral direction: away from what God forbids and toward what He loves. This is a crucial link for decision making, because it reminds us that many choices are not actually open questions at all. Where a path involves what God has plainly called evil, the fearing heart simply turns from it. The fear of the Lord settles a great many decisions before we ever reach the harder, genuinely open ones.

Help students feel the freedom in this. To fear the Lord and distrust our own self-sufficiency is not a cramped or fearful way to live; it is the only sane way for a creature to live before an infinite God. The humble decision maker, who holds his own judgment loosely and reveres God deeply, is far freer and far safer than the self-assured one, because he remains teachable, correctable, and open to the wisdom God supplies.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fear of the Lord as reverent awe and the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10)
- The danger of being wise in one's own eyes: becoming uncorrectable (Proverbs 14:12)
- The link between fearing God and turning away from evil
- Many decisions already settled by God's revealed moral will
- Humility and teachability as marks of a wise decision maker

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between cringing fear and the reverent fear of the Lord?
- How does being wise in our own eyes make us harder to correct?
- Which of your recent decisions were really already settled by what God has called good or evil?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where does pride sneak into your decision making? Think of a recent choice you made quickly and confidently, without much prayer or counsel. How might a deeper fear of the Lord have slowed you down, softened you, or changed the outcome?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question follows naturally from verse 7. Pride rarely announces itself; it usually shows up as speed and certainty, a quick and confident move made without prayer, Scripture, or counsel, simply because we were sure we already knew best. Help students examine not only their bad decisions but their confident ones, since pride often hides most successfully behind competence.

Invite honest reflection on what self-assured haste tends to cost. A decision made without prayer skips the very dependence that verse 5 calls for. A decision made without counsel forfeits the protection that Proverbs elsewhere commends (Proverbs 15:22). A decision made without searching Scripture may run straight past something God has already said. None of these omissions feels dramatic in the moment, but together they describe a heart leaning on its own understanding rather than fearing the Lord.

Then turn toward formation. The fear of the Lord does not make us indecisive; it makes us humble, prayerful, and teachable in the midst of deciding. Encourage students to imagine how a recent confident choice might have looked different if they had paused to pray, opened the Word, or asked one wise person before acting. The aim is not regret but growth: a settled habit of bowing before God even, and especially, in the decisions we feel most sure about.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride often disguised as speed and confidence rather than open arrogance
- The cost of skipping prayer, counsel, and Scripture in a decision
- Self-assured competence as a common hiding place for pride
- The fear of the Lord expressed in humble, prayerful, teachable deciding

Discussion Prompts

- Where does pride most often show up in the way you decide things?
- Think of a recent confident choice: what might prayer or counsel have added?
- What habit could help you bow before God even in the decisions you feel sure about?

Question 9

Student Question:

Scripture distinguishes between what God has plainly revealed for us to obey and what He keeps hidden in His own sovereign purposes. In light of verses 5 through 8, how should a Christian think about "the will of God" for a decision? Are we meant to discover a secret, individual blueprint by reading signs, or to walk in the moral will God has already made clear while trusting Him with the outcomes we cannot see?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it lays the cornerstone for the whole study, so handle it with care and confidence. The crucial move is to distinguish two things Scripture means when it speaks of God's will. There is God's revealed will, sometimes called His moral will, which He has made plain in His Word and which we are responsible to know and obey. And there is God's sovereign will, sometimes called His secret will, which is His hidden purpose governing everything that comes to pass. Deuteronomy 29:29 draws the line exactly: "The

secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

Apply that distinction to decision making. God's revealed will is not hidden at all; it is the thing He has spoken. He has told us plainly to flee sexual immorality, to be honest, to love our neighbor, to forgive, to assemble with the saints, to provide for our families, to do our work as unto the Lord. A vast amount of any decision is already settled the moment we ask what God has revealed. God's sovereign will, on the other hand, governs the outcomes, who we will marry, where we will live, how long we will work at a given place, and that secret will is precisely what He has not given us to read in advance. We are not called to decode it through signs; we are called to trust the God who holds it.

This is where both errors must be named clearly. The mystical, sign-seeking error tries to pry open the secret will, treating fleeces, feelings, open doors, and inner impressions as coded messages revealing a hidden, individual blueprint we must find or forfeit. Scripture never instructs believers to make decisions this way. The opposite error, a prayerless self-reliance, ignores God's revealed will and trusts only human calculation, leaving the Lord out of the room entirely. Proverbs 3 rejects both. We walk in the revealed moral will of God, we use sanctified wisdom, and we entrust the unseen outcomes to His sovereign and fatherly care.

Address the anxious question directly, because it haunts many sincere believers: "What if there is a single perfect person, job, or city that is God's one hidden plan for me, and I miss it?" The way of wisdom answers gently. Within the bounds of God's revealed will, He grants His children real freedom and real responsibility to make wise choices, and He sovereignly weaves even those choices into His good purposes. A believer who walks in obedience, seeks wisdom, prays, and then decides has not missed God's will; he has done exactly what God asks. He need not fear that one wrong turn has wrecked a fragile divine blueprint, because his security rests not in cracking a secret code but in the faithfulness of a sovereign Father.

Make sure students leave with both halves intact. We are fully responsible to know and obey what God has revealed, and we are invited to rest in what God has kept hidden. That is the heartbeat of this entire study. Far from leaving us rudderless, it frees us from superstition and from pride alike, and it returns us to the quiet confidence of a child who trusts that his Father is both speaking clearly and ruling wisely.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The distinction between God's revealed (moral) will and His sovereign (secret) will (Deuteronomy 29:29)
- God's revealed will as the plain content of Scripture that we must know and obey
- God's sovereign will as the hidden governance of outcomes, not given to us to read in advance
- A clear naming of the mystical, sign-seeking error that tries to pry open the secret will
- A clear naming of the prayerless, self-reliant error that ignores the revealed will

- Real freedom and responsibility within the bounds of God's revealed will
- Security grounded in the faithfulness of a sovereign Father, not in decoding a secret blueprint

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between God's revealed will and His secret will, and why does it matter for decisions?
- How does naming both errors, sign-seeking and prayerless self-reliance, help you find the path between them?
- How would your decision making change if you truly believed you cannot wreck God's plan by walking in wisdom and obedience?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Proverbs 3:5–8 as a whole. Solomon takes an anxious decision maker and points not to a hidden voice but to a trustworthy God, a clear Word, and the fear of the Lord. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from this passage that you most need to carry into the next decision you make?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole passage and asks students to name one concrete way Christ is forming them through it. Resist letting answers stay general. "I want to trust God more" is a fine beginning, but press gently for the specific: trust Him with what, expressed how, starting when. The truth of Proverbs 3 is meant to travel home with each student into a particular decision waiting on the kitchen table.

It can help to walk back through the movement of the passage as a prompt. Solomon takes an anxious heart and points it away from signs and toward four steadying realities: a God who can be trusted with all the heart, a refusal to lean on our own understanding, a glad acknowledgment of God in every area of life, and the fear of the Lord that turns from evil. Invite each student to ask which of these their heart most needs to grasp before the next decision they face.

Close by reminding students that the goal of this study is transformation, not merely information. We are not assembling a clever technique for guidance; we are becoming the kind of people who trust their Father, rest in His providence, and walk forward in wisdom. Encourage each one to leave with a single truth from this passage to carry, return to, and pray over in the week ahead, so that the word does its forming work between now and the next gathering.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at transformation of the heart, not merely information about guidance
- Trust in the Father as the steadying center of a believer's decisions
- The way of wisdom as a settled disposition, not a one-time technique
- Carrying and meditating on one concrete truth into a real decision

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the four realities in this passage does your heart most need right now, and why?
- What decision are you facing where you can put this truth to work this week?
- How can this group pray for and encourage you in that one specific step?