

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

Lesson 7: Has God Provided an Opportunity? Open and Closed Doors

1 Corinthians 16:5–9 (with Acts 16:6–10)

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson addresses the question of opportunity, the so-called open and closed doors, and it is one of the most important lessons in the study for guarding against mysticism. Doctrinally, what is at stake is the difference between providence and revelation. God genuinely governs our circumstances, opening and closing real doors in our path, and opportunity is a legitimate factor to weigh in a decision. But circumstances are not coded messages, and reading them as secret instructions is precisely the popular error this study resists. The teacher should help students take opportunity seriously while refusing the superstition that treats every open or closed door as an inspired command.

Two texts work together. First Corinthians 16:5–9 shows the apostle Paul making detailed plans “if the Lord permits,” weighing an open door for effective work, and noting that the very same open door came with many adversaries. That single verse corrects two common assumptions at once: that an easy path means God’s yes, and that a hard path means His no. Acts 16:6–10 then shows God truly redirecting Paul’s steps. The teacher must handle Acts 16 with care, however: the way God guided Paul there, forbidding him by the Spirit and granting a vision, was direct revelation given to an apostle in the foundational age of the church. It demonstrates God’s sovereign governance of our paths, but it is not the everyday pattern of guidance for believers today, who are led by His completed Word, wisdom, counsel, prayer, and providence rather than by visions and inner voices.

Beyond the doctrine, this lesson aims to cure a real source of confusion and anxiety. Many sincere believers have made poor decisions by misreading circumstances, abandoning good paths at the first sign of difficulty or charging into bad ones because a door seemed conveniently open. The formational aim is to produce believers who trust God’s providence deeply, weigh opportunity wisely, and are freed from the exhausting habit of trying to decode every event as a private message. Send students home more confident in God’s sovereign care and less captive to circumstantial fortune-telling.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul lays out his travel plans in detail, yet adds, “I will do this if the Lord permits” (vv. 5–7). What does this teach about making real plans as a Christian? How do we hold together genuine planning and humble submission to God’s overruling will?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by noticing that Paul plans. He is not a man who refuses to make decisions while waiting for a sign; he lays out a concrete itinerary, where he will go, how long he will stay, what he hopes to accomplish. This is significant, because some believers treat all planning as a failure of faith, as though the spiritual thing were to drift and wait for circumstances to decide for them. Paul models the opposite: thoughtful, deliberate planning is entirely compatible with deep trust in God.

Then notice the qualifier: “if the Lord permits.” Paul holds his plans with an open hand. He makes them in earnest, yet he submits them to a God who may overrule. James teaches the same posture: we should say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (James 4:15). This is not a magic phrase to tack onto our sentences; it is a genuine disposition of the heart that plans seriously and submits humbly, ready to have its plans redirected by the God who governs all things.

Help students see that these two, planning and submission, are not in tension but in partnership. We plan because God has given us minds and made us responsible; we submit because God, not we, finally governs the outcome. The believer who refuses to plan is not more spiritual, only less responsible; the believer who plans without submission is not more competent, only more presumptuous. Wisdom does both: it plans like everything depended on diligence and submits like everything depended on God.

Bring it to bear on the lesson’s theme. This posture frames how we should read open and closed doors. Because we plan in earnest, we move forward through the doors that stand open; because we submit humbly, we accept it when God bars a way we intended to go. Paul’s “if the Lord permits” is the very attitude that lets a believer weigh opportunity without either passivity or presumption.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul as a planner: deliberate planning compatible with deep trust
- A correction of the idea that planning is a failure of faith
- Holding plans with an open hand under ‘if the Lord permits’ (James 4:15)
- Planning and submission as partners, not opposites
- This posture as the frame for weighing open and closed doors

Discussion Prompts

- Is planning a failure of faith, or an expression of responsible trust? Why?
- What does ‘if the Lord permits’ look like as a real disposition, not just a phrase?
- How do we plan seriously and submit humbly at the same time?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest about how you hold your own plans. Do you tend to grip them too tightly, as if they were certain, or do you refuse to plan at all and call it faith? What would "if the Lord permits" actually change about the way you make plans this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question asks students to find their tendency. Some grip their plans like guarantees, anxious and controlling, devastated when anything disrupts them, because they have quietly forgotten that the future belongs to God. Others avoid planning altogether, mistaking aimlessness for trust, and then read whatever happens as God's will by default. Both miss Paul's balance.

Help the tight-gripper loosen. Plans held as certainties become idols and tyrants; every disruption feels like a catastrophe. The cure is not to stop planning but to plan under "if the Lord permits," genuinely open to God's redirection, so that a derailed plan becomes an occasion for trust rather than despair. The future was never ours to control, and remembering that brings peace.

Help the non-planner take responsibility. Refusing to plan is not faith; it is often a way of avoiding the work and accountability of decision. God has given us minds to use. Encourage the non-planner to make actual, prayerful plans, while the tight-gripper learns to hold plans loosely. For each, invite one concrete change this week: a plan made and surrendered, or a plan finally made at all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two tendencies: gripping plans as certainties, or refusing to plan and calling it faith
- Plans held as guarantees becoming idols and tyrants
- Aimlessness mistaken for trust
- Planning under 'if the Lord permits' as the balanced cure

Discussion Prompts

- Do you grip your plans too tightly, or avoid planning altogether?
- How does each tendency go wrong?
- What would 'if the Lord permits' change about your planning this week?

Question 3**Student Question:**

Paul explains a decision by saying, "a wide door for effective work has opened to me" (v. 9). What does it mean that an opportunity, an open door, is a real factor in a believer's decisions? Why is opportunity worth weighing without being treated as an automatic command?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Affirm first that opportunity is a real and legitimate factor. Paul points to an open door as part of his reasoning for staying in Ephesus. The metaphor is natural: a door represents access, possibility, a way that stands open for fruitful work. When God in His providence makes a way available, that availability genuinely matters. A believer is right to consider whether a path is actually open to him, since we usually cannot walk through doors that are shut.

Clarify what an open door is and is not. An open door is an opportunity, a possibility that God has providentially made available. It is not, by itself, a command to walk through. Many doors stand open that we should not enter; a wide-open opportunity to sin is still sin, and even a good opportunity may not be the wisest or the right one for us at this time. The openness of a door tells us a way exists; it does not tell us, all by itself, that we must take it.

Show how opportunity functions as one factor among the others this study has built. A wise believer weighs an open door alongside Scripture, motive, impact, capability, and counsel. The door being open answers one question, is this even possible, but the other questions remain. This keeps opportunity in its proper place: significant, worth weighing, but not sovereign. It is a piece of the picture, not the whole of it.

Guard against the error that an open door overrides everything else. People sometimes treat a sudden opportunity as a trump card: “the door opened, so it must be God’s will.” But Scripture never tells us to obey doors. It tells us to walk in wisdom. An opportunity is an invitation to bring all our wisdom to bear, not a shortcut around it. The believer asks not merely “Is the door open?” but “Given that this door is open, is walking through it wise, biblical, and good?”

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Opportunity as a real, legitimate factor in decisions (1 Corinthians 16:9)
- An open door as a providential possibility, not an automatic command
- Open doors we should not enter, including open doors to sin
- Opportunity weighed alongside Scripture, motive, impact, capability, and counsel
- An open door as an invitation to wisdom, not a shortcut around it

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter whether a path is actually open to us?
- Why is an open door not, by itself, a command to walk through?
- How does opportunity fit alongside the other questions this study has raised?

Question 4

Student Question:

What open door or opportunity is in front of you right now? Have you honestly weighed it as one factor among many, or either ignored it or treated it as a guaranteed sign of God's will? What would wise consideration of it look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question brings the open-door principle to a present opportunity. Most students have some door before them: a job, a move, a relationship, a ministry, a chance that has appeared. The aim is to help them weigh it rightly, neither dismissing a genuine opportunity nor treating its mere appearance as a divine command.

Help students avoid both ditches with their actual situation. Some ignore real opportunities out of fear or inertia, letting good doors close unwalked. Others seize on an opportunity precisely because it appeared, reasoning that the door must be God's will simply because it opened. Wise consideration sits between: taking the opportunity seriously as a real factor, and then weighing it by everything else, whether it is biblical, what motives drive the interest, what impact it would have, whether one is equipped for it, and what counsel says.

Then call for that wise consideration as a concrete exercise. Encourage each student to take the door before them and run it through the study's questions rather than reacting on instinct. The goal is a decision made with full wisdom, in which the open door is honestly weighed but not allowed to silence every other consideration.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Bringing the open-door principle to a present opportunity
- Two ditches: ignoring real opportunities, or treating their appearance as command
- Wise consideration as weighing the door by all the study's questions
- A decision made with full wisdom, not instinct

Discussion Prompts

- What open door is in front of you right now?
- Have you ignored it, seized it uncritically, or weighed it wisely?
- What would wise consideration of it look like this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

In the same sentence Paul says the open door came "and there are many adversaries" (v. 9). What does it tell us that a God-given opportunity can come with serious opposition? How does this correct the assumption that an easy path means God's approval and a hard path means His disapproval?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Slow down on this striking detail, because it overturns a deeply rooted assumption. Paul says, in one breath, that a great door for effective work has opened and that there are many adversaries. The opportunity and the opposition arrive together. Paul does not conclude that the adversaries mean he has misread the door, nor that the open door means the work will be easy. He simply states both and presses forward into the fruitful, contested work.

Expose the false assumption this corrects. Many of us instinctively read circumstances as a kind of divine scoreboard: smooth means God approves, difficult means God disapproves. So we abandon good paths the moment they get hard, assuming the difficulty must be a closed door, and we pursue easy paths assuming the ease must be God's blessing. Paul's experience shatters both inferences. The most God-honoring opportunities often come precisely with the fiercest opposition.

Ground this in the broader witness of Scripture and experience. The path of obedience is regularly a hard one. Jesus promised tribulation (John 16:33); Paul said that through many hardships we enter the kingdom (Acts 14:22); nearly every great work of God in Scripture met resistance. Difficulty, then, is not evidence that we have chosen wrongly. Often it is evidence that we are doing something worth opposing. By the same token, an easy, frictionless path is not automatic proof of God's blessing; the broad and easy way is not always the right one.

Apply this directly to reading doors. The lesson is to stop treating ease and difficulty as God's yes and no. A hard road may be exactly the open door God intends, adversaries and all. An easy road may be a door better left unentered. The believer must weigh opportunity by wisdom and Scripture, not by the mere presence or absence of resistance, which is a notoriously unreliable guide to the will of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A God-given opportunity arriving together with serious opposition (1 Corinthians 16:9)
- The false scoreboard: ease as approval, difficulty as disapproval
- Abandoning good paths at the first hardship, pursuing easy paths as blessing
- The path of obedience often hard and contested (John 16:33; Acts 14:22)
- Resistance as an unreliable guide to the will of God

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the open door and the adversaries came together?
- Where have you treated difficulty as God's no or ease as His yes?
- Why is the presence or absence of resistance an unreliable guide to God's will?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where have you misread difficulty as a closed door, or ease as God's green light? Think of a specific decision. How might it have gone differently if you had not assumed that hardship meant no and convenience meant yes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to find the assumption at work in their own history. Almost everyone has at some point abandoned something good because it got hard, or pursued something unwise because it was easy, while telling themselves they were reading God's will in the circumstances. Naming a specific instance makes the lesson personal and concrete.

Help students reflect honestly. Was there a ministry, a relationship, a commitment, or a calling they walked away from at the first serious difficulty, concluding too quickly that the closed-feeling door meant God's no? Was there an easy opportunity they seized mainly because it was convenient, mistaking the smooth path for God's endorsement? The point is not to relitigate the past with guilt but to learn the pattern so it can be corrected going forward.

Then move toward future wisdom. Encourage students to notice when they are tempted to read ease or difficulty as a divine verdict, and to replace that instinct with the harder, better work of weighing the decision by Scripture, wisdom, and counsel. The aim is a settled refusal to let the mere comfort or hardship of a path do their discerning for them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Finding the ease-and-difficulty assumption in one's own history
- Abandoning good things at the first hardship, seizing easy things uncritically
- Learning the pattern without relitigating the past in guilt
- Replacing the instinct with deliberate weighing by Scripture, wisdom, and counsel

Discussion Prompts

- When have you read difficulty as a closed door or ease as a green light?
- How might that decision have gone differently with wiser discernment?
- How can you catch yourself making that assumption next time?

Question 7

Student Question:

In Acts 16, God redirected Paul away from Asia and Bithynia and toward Macedonia (vv. 6–10). What does this account teach about God's providence in opening and closing the doors of our circumstances? How is God's governing of our path a comfort even when we cannot see what He is doing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk students through the scene. Paul intends to preach in Asia but is prevented; he tries to enter Bithynia but is not allowed; then, through a vision of a man pleading, "Come over to Macedonia and help us," he is directed to cross into Europe. The immediate lesson is that God truly governs the paths of His people. Paul's redirection was not random; the sovereign Lord was steering His servant toward where the gospel was meant to go next, and the conversion of Lydia and the Philippian jailer would soon follow.

Draw out the comfort of providence. Behind our movements, our open and closed doors, our redirections and disappointments, stands a God who is actively governing for good purposes we often cannot see. Paul could not have known, when the door to Asia closed, that Europe was about to open. The believer can take deep comfort here: a closed door is not the end of God's plan but often the means of it. The Lord who shut Bithynia opened Macedonia.

Show how this steadies us in disappointment. When our own doors close, we rarely see the Macedonia on the other side. But the same God governs our circumstances. This does not mean every closed door has an obvious silver lining we will discover quickly, nor that we should sentimentally assume every disappointment is a disguised blessing. It means we can trust that God is sovereignly at work in the ordering of our paths, weaving even our redirections into His good purposes (Romans 8:28).

Prepare the ground for the next question by flagging a crucial distinction now. Notice that God guided Paul here in an extraordinary way, forbidding him by the Spirit and granting a vision. This shows God's providential governance vividly, but the method, direct revelation to an apostle, is not the ordinary way God guides us, and we will take that up directly in the heaviest question of the lesson. For now, fix on the comfort: the God who governed Paul's path governs ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's real governance of His people's paths (Acts 16:6–10)
- Paul's redirection serving God's larger purpose (the gospel reaching Europe)
- A closed door often the means of God's plan, not its end
- The comfort of providence when we cannot see what God is doing (Romans 8:28)
- A flagged distinction: God's extraordinary method here versus ordinary guidance today

Discussion Prompts

- How does God's governing of Paul's path encourage you about your own?
- When has a closed door later proved to be God's redirection?
- Why must we trust providence without sentimentally assuming every closed door has a quick silver lining?

Question 8

Student Question:

Recall a door that closed in your life, a plan that fell through, a way that was barred. How did you interpret it at the time? Looking back now, can you see God's hand in it differently than you did then?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question invites students to revisit a closed door from their own past with the benefit of hindsight. In the moment, closed doors usually feel like loss, failure, or even abandonment by God. With time, many of them look different. The exercise builds the trust in providence that the previous question taught, by grounding it in the student's own experience.

Help students reflect with honesty and nuance. Sometimes hindsight reveals a clear mercy: the job we did not get, the relationship that ended, the move that fell through, opened the way to something better. Sometimes the good is subtler, a character formed, a dependence on God deepened, a lesson learned. And sometimes we still cannot see the purpose, and that is honest too; trusting providence does not require that we always discern the reason.

Then turn the reflection toward present trust. The point is not merely nostalgia but formation: having seen God's hand in past closed doors, we are better able to trust Him with present ones. Encourage students to let a remembered mercy strengthen their confidence that the God who governed their path before is governing it still, even where the purpose remains hidden.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Revisiting a closed door with the benefit of hindsight
- Closed doors that felt like loss later revealed as mercy
- Subtler goods: character formed, dependence deepened
- Honest trust even when the purpose still cannot be seen
- Past mercies strengthening present trust in providence

Discussion Prompts

- What closed door from your past can you now see differently?
- How did you interpret it then, and how do you interpret it now?
- How can a remembered mercy strengthen your trust with a present closed door?

Question 9

Student Question:

Scripture shows God truly governing our circumstances (Acts 16), yet an open door came to Paul alongside many adversaries (1 Cor. 16:9), and the dramatic way God led Paul in Acts 16, by direct revelation and a vision to an apostle, is not the everyday way He guides us. So how should a Christian rightly read open and closed doors? How do we take opportunity seriously as one

factor weighed by wisdom, without treating circumstances as coded instructions or expecting visions and inner voices to direct us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it lies near the center of the whole study's concern, so teach it with clarity and care. The crucial distinction is between providence and revelation. Providence is God's sovereign governance of all circumstances, including the doors that open and close in our lives. Revelation is God's authoritative communication of His will in words. Both are real, but they are not the same, and the great error in reading circumstances is to treat providence as if it were revelation, to read an event as if it were a sentence God is speaking to tell us what to do.

Establish what circumstances can and cannot tell us. Because God governs all things, our circumstances are never outside His control, and they genuinely shape what is possible. An open door tells us a way is available; a closed door tells us a way is barred. That is real information, and we weigh it. But circumstances do not come with their interpretation attached. An open door does not announce, "God commands you to enter"; a closed door does not announce, "God forbids this forever." To read such messages into our circumstances is to practice a kind of Christianized fortune-telling, and it has led many sincere believers astray, since the same event can be read a dozen ways.

Now handle the Acts 16 method directly, because it is essential to the boundary this study guards. God did tell Paul, in words, where not to go and where to go, by the Spirit's forbidding and by a vision. But notice what that was: direct, verbal revelation given to an inspired apostle during the foundational age of the church, when God was revealing and confirming His word through such means. That is not the ordinary way God guides Christians today, and we should neither expect nor seek visions, inner voices, or fresh revelations to direct our decisions. The faith has been once for all delivered, and the New Testament is now our sufficient authority. To make Paul's extraordinary, revelatory experience the template for our everyday guidance is to misread the passage and to drift back into the very mysticism the rest of Scripture warns against.

Then give students the right way to read doors. Take opportunity seriously as one factor among many. When a door stands open, ask not only whether it is open but whether walking through it is biblical, well-motivated, beneficial, within your gifting, and confirmed by wise counsel. When a door is closed, accept that this particular way is barred for now, adjust your plans humbly under "if the Lord permits," and trust that God governs the redirection, without concluding that you have necessarily read a permanent divine verdict. In all of it, wisdom interprets circumstances; circumstances do not replace wisdom.

Bring the balance to rest. We hold two truths together. God truly governs our circumstances, so opportunity matters and providence can be trusted. And circumstances are not coded revelations, so we must not read secret instructions into them or wait for mystical

confirmations. The believer weighs open and closed doors as real factors, decides by wisdom under the sufficient Word, and rests in the providence of a God who is steering his path even when no door is speaking. That is the mature, peaceful way to read the doors of our lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The central distinction between providence (God governing circumstances) and revelation (God speaking His will in words)
- Circumstances showing what is possible but not coming with their interpretation attached
- Reading messages into circumstances as a kind of Christianized fortune-telling
- Acts 16 as direct, verbal revelation to an inspired apostle, not the template for guidance today
- No expectation of visions, inner voices, or new revelation; the New Testament as sufficient authority
- Opportunity weighed as one factor by wisdom; closed doors accepted humbly under providence
- Wisdom interprets circumstances; circumstances do not replace wisdom

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between providence and revelation, and why does confusing them lead us astray?
- Why is the way God led Paul in Acts 16 not the pattern for our everyday guidance?
- How do we weigh an open or closed door wisely without reading a secret message into it?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across 1 Corinthians 16:5–9 and Acts 16:6–10. Paul planned wisely, weighed an open door, faced adversaries, and trusted a God who governs the way. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these passages. What is the single truth here that you most need to carry into your next decision?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the lesson and asks each student to name one concrete way Christ is forming them through it. Resist generalities. “I want to trust God’s providence” is a fine start, but press toward the specific: trust Him with which door, weighed how, beginning when. The lesson’s teaching on opportunity and providence is meant to land in a real, present decision.

Walk back through the movement of the passages as a prompt. Paul planned under “if the Lord permits,” weighed an open door for effective work, refused to be turned back by adversaries, and trusted the God who redirected his path toward Macedonia. Invite students to ask which of

these truths their heart most needs, whether to plan more humbly, weigh an opportunity more wisely, press on through difficulty, or rest more deeply in providence.

Close by recentering on transformation. The aim of this lesson is to free students from circumstantial fortune-telling and form in them a settled trust in God's providence joined to wise discernment. Encourage each one to carry a single truth into the week, returning to it in prayer, so that they learn to read the doors of their lives with wisdom and rest in the God who governs them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at forming trust in providence joined to wise discernment
- Freedom from circumstantial fortune-telling
- Planning humbly, weighing opportunity, pressing through difficulty, resting in providence
- Carrying one concrete truth into a specific decision this week

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from these passages does your heart most need before your next decision?
- Which open or closed door are you facing that this lesson speaks to?
- How can this group pray for and encourage you in that one specific step?