

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

Lesson 11: Trust God's Providence: The Lord Establishes His Steps

Proverbs 16:1–9 (with Romans 8:28)

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson presents the providence of God as the ground of peace for the decision maker, and it is the pastoral heart of the study. Doctrinally, what is at stake is how Scripture holds together two truths that anxious believers often pull apart: genuine human planning and responsibility on the one hand, and God's sovereign governance of outcomes on the other. Proverbs 16:1–9 affirms both without embarrassment, climaxing in verse 9: "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps." Romans 8:28 then assures those who love God that He works all things together for their good. The teacher should help students see that these truths are not in tension but in harmony, and that together they free us to decide responsibly and then rest.

The lesson must steer carefully between two errors, and the teacher should name both clearly. On one side is fatalism, the notion that because God is sovereign, our choices do not really matter; this denies the genuine human responsibility that Scripture everywhere affirms and that this whole study assumes. On the other side is anxious second-guessing, the fear that a wrong decision has knocked us off God's perfect will onto a permanent second-best track; this denies the comfort of providence and burdens believers with a dread Scripture never sanctions. The biblical balance affirms real human choice and real divine sovereignty, and it assures the faithful that a believer walking in wisdom cannot wreck the purposes of an almighty God.

Beyond the doctrine, this lesson is meant to bring profound relief. Many sincere Christians are quietly tormented by the fear of having missed God's will, or are paralyzed by the pressure of getting every decision exactly right. The deeper formational aim is to settle them into the rest of God's providence, so that they make decisions with seriousness but without dread, and look back on past decisions, even poor ones, with trust rather than torment. Send students home able to say with Joseph that the God who governs all things can be trusted to weave even their stumbles into good, and therefore free to plan, decide, and rest.

Question 1

Student Question:

Proverbs opens this section, "The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD" (v. 1). What does it mean that our planning is genuinely ours, yet the final outcome rests with God? Why is it important to affirm both, real human planning and real divine governance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by letting the proverb hold its two halves together. “The plans of the heart belong to man” affirms that our planning is genuinely ours; we really do deliberate, intend, and decide, and these are not illusions. “The answer of the tongue is from the LORD” affirms that the outcome, how things actually come out, rests finally with God. The verse refuses to collapse either truth into the other. Man plans truly; God governs truly.

Explain why affirming both matters so much, since most errors come from dropping one half. If we keep only human planning and lose divine governance, we are left anxious and self-reliant, as though everything depended on getting our plans exactly right. If we keep only divine governance and lose human planning, we drift into fatalism, treating our choices as meaningless. Scripture insists on both at once: our decisions are real and weighty, and God is sovereignly over them. This is the framework within which a believer can be both responsible and restful.

Help students feel the relief built into this balance. We are responsible for our planning, which is a dignity, not a burden; God treats us as real agents whose choices matter. But we are not responsible for the outcome, which is a mercy; that weight rests on God, who is wise and good. The believer plans with diligence and releases the result with trust, because the proverb has placed each in its proper hands.

Anchor this in the doctrine of providence rightly understood. God’s providence is His continual, sovereign governance of all things, working through real secondary causes, including genuine human choices, rather than around them. He does not erase our agency; He governs through it. This guards against both the Calvinistic determinism that would swallow up human responsibility and the deistic notion that God has left the outcomes to chance. God truly rules, and we truly choose, and the proverb names both.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Both halves held together: man plans truly, God governs truly (Proverbs 16:1)
- Losing divine governance leads to anxiety; losing human planning leads to fatalism
- Responsibility for planning as dignity; release of outcomes as mercy
- Providence as God governing through genuine human choices, not around them
- A balance guarding against both determinism and deism

Discussion Prompts

- What is lost when we keep only human planning, or only divine governance?
- How is it a relief that we are responsible for planning but not for the outcome?
- What does it mean that God governs through our real choices rather than around them?

Question 2

Student Question:

When you make plans, do you tend to hold them with white-knuckled anxiety, as if everything depended on you, or with trusting openness to God? What does your typical posture reveal about where you believe control really lies?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question asks students to notice the emotional posture they bring to their plans, because that posture reveals their functional theology. Some hold their plans with a white-knuckled grip, anxious and controlling, devastated by any disruption. Others hold them loosely, with a trusting openness to God. The teacher should invite honest self-observation here, since our felt anxiety often exposes what we actually believe about who is in control.

Help students read their anxiety as information. A frantic, controlling grip on our plans usually means that, whatever we profess, we are functionally trusting ourselves to secure the outcome. The intensity of our distress when plans fail reveals how much we had been depending on our own management rather than on God's providence. This is not meant to provoke guilt but insight: our reactions show us where we have quietly placed our trust.

Then point toward the trusting posture and how it grows. Holding plans with open hands does not mean caring less or planning poorly; it means planning diligently while resting in God's governance of the result. This posture grows not by trying to feel calmer but by deepening our conviction that God truly establishes our steps. Encourage students to notice their grip on a current plan and to practice consciously entrusting its outcome to the Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The emotional posture toward our plans as a revealer of functional theology
- A white-knuckled grip exposing trust in ourselves to secure outcomes
- Reading our anxiety as information about where our trust rests
- A trusting posture that plans diligently while resting in God's governance

Discussion Prompts

- Do you hold your plans with anxiety or with trusting openness?
- What does your reaction when plans fail reveal about where you place your trust?
- How might you consciously entrust the outcome of a current plan to God?

Question 3

Student Question:

The Preacher says, "Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established" (v. 3). What does it mean to commit your work and plans to the Lord? How is committing our plans to God different from either passively doing nothing or anxiously controlling everything?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Unpack the verb “commit,” which pictures rolling a burden off ourselves and onto the Lord, entrusting our work and plans to His care. To commit our work to God is to do it as unto Him, to seek His will in it, to depend on Him for its fruit, and to hand the outcome over to His governance. The promise attached, “your plans will be established,” does not guarantee that every plan we make will succeed exactly as we wished, but that plans entrusted to God will be brought to their right end under His good and sovereign hand.

Distinguish committing from passivity, the first of two errors the question raises. Committing our work to the Lord is not doing nothing and calling it faith. The verse assumes real work and real plans; it is that work which we commit. The passive person who waits for God to do everything while he does nothing has misunderstood; commitment is the entrusting of genuine, diligent labor, not the abandonment of labor.

Distinguish committing from anxious control, the second error. Equally, committing our work to the Lord is not gripping every detail in fear, trying to guarantee the result by our own striving. The whole point of committing is to release the outcome to God. The anxious controller has also misunderstood; he labors as though everything depended on him alone, never rolling the burden onto the Lord. Commitment lies between: full diligence in our work, full trust in God for its establishing.

Make it practical. To commit a plan to the Lord might involve a deliberate prayer of entrusting, a conscious refusal to manipulate or to despair, and a settled willingness to accept how God brings it to pass. Encourage students to see committing their work to God not as a one-time formality but as an ongoing posture, doing their part with diligence and leaving the establishing of their plans to the One who governs all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Committing as rolling our work and plans onto the Lord (Proverbs 16:3)
- The promise of establishment as God bringing entrusted plans to their right end
- Committing distinguished from passivity that abandons real labor
- Committing distinguished from anxious control that grips every detail
- Diligence in our work joined to trust in God for the outcome

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to commit your work to the Lord in practice?
- How is committing different from doing nothing and calling it faith?
- How is it different from anxiously trying to control the result?

Question 4

Student Question:

What is one plan, project, or decision you need to consciously commit to the Lord this week, entrusting the outcome to Him while you do your part faithfully? What makes that hard?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks for a specific act of committing. It is easy to affirm the principle of committing our work to the Lord and hard to name the one plan we have been carrying entirely on our own shoulders. The teacher should give students a quiet moment to identify it, since the honest answer usually surfaces when we slow down.

Help students notice what makes committing hard, since the resistance is revealing. Often we cannot release a plan because we fear that if we do not control it, it will fail, or because the plan has become the thing we are trusting in for security or significance. Naming that fear exposes where trust in God is being tested, and where a good plan may have crept into the place that belongs to God alone.

Then call for the concrete step. Committing a plan to the Lord this week might mean a specific prayer of entrusting, a deliberate decision to stop manipulating or fretting, and a renewed commitment to do our own part faithfully while leaving the result to God. Encourage each student to make one such act of committing, trusting the promise that plans entrusted to the Lord are established by Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from the principle of committing to a specific act
- The resistance to committing as revealing where our trust rests
- Fear of failure and misplaced security behind our tight grip on a plan
- Doing our part faithfully while entrusting the outcome to God

Discussion Prompts

- What plan or decision have you been carrying entirely on your own shoulders?
- What makes it hard to entrust the outcome to God?
- What would consciously committing it to the Lord look like this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

The heart of the chapter declares, “The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps” (v. 9). How does this single verse hold together human responsibility and God’s sovereignty? Why is it such good news that God, not we, establishes the final steps?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Give this verse the weight it deserves, for it is the doctrinal center of the lesson and one of the clearest statements of providence in Scripture. In a single line it affirms both truths fully. “The heart of man plans his way”: we genuinely plan, intend, and choose, and we are responsible for it. “But the LORD establishes his steps”: God sovereignly governs how the path actually unfolds. The verse does not pit these against each other or qualify one with the other; it simply holds both, inviting us to live in the tension with trust.

Explain how the two relate without dissolving. Our planning is real and meaningful; God’s establishing is sovereign and final. God does not merely watch our plans and react; He establishes our steps, governing the actual course of our lives toward His purposes. Yet He does this through our real choices, not by canceling them. We are neither puppets whose planning is a sham, nor autonomous masters whose plans God must simply accept. We plan as responsible agents; God establishes as sovereign Lord.

Draw out why it is such good news that God establishes the steps. If the final establishing of our path rested on us, on the perfection of our planning and the accuracy of our foresight, we would have every reason to be terrified, since our wisdom is limited and our knowledge of the future is nil. But the establishing rests on God, who is infinitely wise, entirely good, and fully sovereign. That means the ultimate shape of a trusting believer’s life is in the safest possible hands. We do our planning; the outcome is secured by Someone far more competent and far more loving than we are.

Bring it to bear on the anxious heart. This verse is medicine for the fear of getting life wrong. We are responsible to plan our way wisely, and we should. But we are not the ones who establish our steps, so the crushing weight of guaranteeing the right outcome was never ours to carry. The believer can plan with care and then rest, knowing that the Lord who loves him is the One establishing his steps. That is not a license for carelessness; it is a deep and steadying comfort.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Proverbs 16:9 as a central statement of providence holding both truths fully
- Real human planning and sovereign divine establishing, neither canceling the other
- God establishing our steps through our real choices, not by canceling them
- The good news that the outcome rests on God’s wisdom and goodness, not our foresight
- The verse as medicine for the fear of getting life wrong

Discussion Prompts

- How does Proverbs 16:9 affirm both our responsibility and God’s sovereignty?
- Why is it good news that God, not we, establishes the final steps?
- How does this verse speak to your fear of getting a decision wrong?

Question 6

Student Question:

Be honest about which error you lean toward: a fatalism that says “my choices don’t really matter since God controls it all,” or an anxious second-guessing that fears every decision might have ruined God’s plan. How has that tendency shown up in your life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question names the two ditches and asks students which one is theirs. Most people lean detectably toward one. The fatalist downplays his choices, reasoning that since God is sovereign, careful decision making hardly matters; this can breed passivity and carelessness. The anxious second-guesser overburdens his choices, fearing that any wrong move has derailed God’s plan for his life; this breeds torment and paralysis. The teacher should help each student identify his characteristic tilt.

Help the fatalist see his error. Scripture never uses God’s sovereignty to excuse irresponsibility. The same Bible that says the Lord establishes our steps commands us to plan wisely, seek counsel, and choose well. If our choices truly did not matter, the previous ten lessons of this study would be pointless. Fatalism is not faith; it is a misuse of providence to avoid the dignity and duty of decision.

Help the anxious second-guesser see his error too, and feel the relief. The fear that one wrong decision has knocked us off God’s perfect plan misunderstands both God’s character and His sovereignty. It pictures God as a fragile planner easily thwarted, and ourselves as powerful enough to wreck His purposes. Neither is true. Encourage each student to name how their particular tendency has shown up, and to begin replacing it with the balanced rest of Proverbs 16: choices that genuinely matter, held by a God who genuinely reigns.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the two ditches: fatalism and anxious second-guessing
- Fatalism misusing sovereignty to excuse carelessness and passivity
- Anxious second-guessing misjudging both God’s character and His sovereignty
- Replacing both with the balanced rest of Proverbs 16

Discussion Prompts

- Which error do you lean toward: fatalism or anxious second-guessing?
- How has that tendency shown up in your decisions?
- What truth from this lesson most directly corrects your particular tilt?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul writes, “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). How does this promise give rest to a heart

worried about its decisions? What does it not promise, and to whom is the promise specifically made?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open up the towering promise of Romans 8:28, which is the resting place this lesson has been building toward. For those who love God, all things, not some things, not only the pleasant things, but all things, work together for good. This includes our circumstances, our trials, and yes, even our imperfect decisions. God is so thoroughly sovereign and so completely good that He weaves the whole tapestry of a believer's life, including the tangled threads, into a good design.

Show how this gives rest to the decision-worried heart. If even a poor decision, sincerely made by one who loves God, is woven by Him into good, then the dread of having ruined our lives by a single wrong choice is dissolved. We are not held hostage by our past decisions. The God who works all things for good is greater than our mistakes, and He is able to bring good even out of the choices we would make differently if we could. This is profound comfort for anyone tormented by the fear of having missed God's will.

Be careful and precise about what the verse does and does not promise, because it is often misapplied. It does not promise that all things are good, or that nothing will hurt, or that every decision will turn out pleasantly. Much that works together for good is painful in itself. Nor does it promise that good outcomes are guaranteed to everyone indiscriminately. The promise is specifically made to those who love God, who are called according to His purpose. It is a covenant promise to God's faithful people, not a generic optimism. The teacher should guard against turning it into a shallow slogan that everything always works out nicely.

Apply it to the believer's posture toward decisions, past and future. Because this promise belongs to those who love God, the faithful believer can make decisions and look back on decisions without torment, trusting that God is working even the imperfect ones toward good. This does not make us careless, since love for God leads us to seek His will earnestly. But it does set us free from the paralyzing fear that our choices might place us beyond the reach of God's good purposes. They cannot.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All things, including our imperfect decisions, worked together for good (Romans 8:28)
- The dissolving of the dread that one wrong choice has ruined our lives
- What the verse does not promise: that all things are pleasant or that nothing hurts
- The promise specifically made to those who love God, called according to His purpose
- Freedom to decide and to remember decisions without torment

Discussion Prompts

- How does Romans 8:28 speak to the fear of having ruined your life by a wrong choice?

- What does this verse not promise, and why does that distinction matter?
- To whom is the promise specifically made, and why is that significant?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think of a past decision you have replayed and second-guessed. How might Romans 8:28 and the truth of God's providence change the way you carry that memory? What would it mean to entrust even your imperfect past choices to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question brings providence to bear on the past, where much decision-anxiety actually lives. Many believers are haunted less by future choices than by past ones, replaying a decision and wondering if it was a tragic wrong turn. The teacher should invite students to name such a memory and to hold it up to the light of God's providence.

Help students reframe the memory without denying reality. Trusting providence does not require pretending a past decision was wise if it was not, nor erasing its real consequences. It means believing that the God who works all things for good has not been defeated by it, and is even now weaving it into His good purposes for those who love Him. Joseph did not pretend his brothers' betrayal was good; he affirmed that God meant it for good. The same God presides over our imperfect histories.

Then call for the act of entrusting. To entrust an imperfect past choice to God is to stop carrying it as a verdict of doom and to release it into the hands of the One who redeems. This may involve confessing any real sin, accepting forgiveness, and then deliberately laying the memory before God in trust. Encourage each student to take one second-guessed decision and entrust it to the God who establishes steps and works all things for good, exchanging torment for rest.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Providence applied to the past, where much decision-anxiety lives
- Reframing a memory without denying its reality or consequences
- Joseph's testimony: God meaning for good what was meant for evil (Genesis 50:20)
- Entrusting an imperfect past choice to the God who redeems
- Exchanging torment over the past for rest in providence

Discussion Prompts

- What past decision do you replay and second-guess?
- How might God's providence change the way you carry that memory?
- What would it look like to entrust that imperfect choice to God this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Scripture affirms both that we genuinely plan and decide (Prov. 16:1, 9) and that the Lord sovereignly establishes our steps and works all things for good (Rom. 8:28). Holding these together, how should a Christian think about the fear of having “missed God’s perfect will”? Why does a faithful believer, walking in wisdom, not need to fear having ruined God’s plan, and how is this different from a fatalism that stops taking our choices seriously?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it brings the whole study’s pastoral aim to its climax, so teach it with both precision and warmth. The fear of having “missed God’s perfect will” rests on a faulty picture: that God has one hidden, fragile, detailed blueprint for each life, a single right job, spouse, city, and decision at every fork, and that a wrong choice permanently knocks us onto an inferior track from which we can never recover. This picture, though common and sincere, is not the teaching of Scripture, and it produces needless torment.

Replace the faulty picture with the biblical one. God’s revealed will, His moral will, is plain, and we are responsible to obey it; within that will He grants His children real freedom and real responsibility to make wise choices. God’s sovereign will governs all outcomes and cannot be thwarted. Nowhere does Scripture teach that a believer earnestly seeking to honor God can, by an honest decision made in wisdom, fall off some secret perfect plan and ruin his life. The God who establishes our steps and works all things for good is not so easily defeated, and our choices, though genuinely significant, are not so powerful as to overturn His purposes.

Draw the comforting conclusion plainly, because students need to hear it directly. A faithful believer, walking in wisdom, obeying God’s revealed will, examining his motives, weighing impact and counsel, praying for wisdom, and then deciding, has done exactly what God asks. He has not missed God’s will; he has done it. There is no separate, hidden, perfect blueprint he was supposed to divine and tragically failed to find. He may make a decision that, in hindsight, he would make differently, and that is part of being a finite creature; but he cannot, by walking faithfully in wisdom, wreck the plan of an almighty and good God. That fear can be laid down for good.

Now guard the other ditch, so this comfort is not mistaken for fatalism. To say we cannot ruin God’s plan is not to say our choices do not matter. They matter enormously. We are genuinely responsible to choose wisely, and foolish or sinful choices have real and sometimes painful consequences, which God in His mercy may still work toward good but which are real nonetheless. The freedom from the fear of missing a secret blueprint is not freedom to be careless; it is freedom to take our real choices seriously without the added, false burden of dread. We decide carefully because our choices matter, and we rest deeply because God reigns.

Bring the balance to rest, gathering the whole study. The mature believer plans like everything depends on his diligence and rests like everything depends on God, because in a sense both are

true. He takes his decisions seriously, walks in wisdom, and then entrusts the outcome to the providence of a sovereign, loving Father. He is delivered from fatalism on one side and from anxious second-guessing on the other. He can make a decision, live with it, and even look back on it, in peace, because the Lord establishes the steps of those who trust Him, and works all things for the good of those who love Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The faulty picture: a hidden, fragile, detailed blueprint easily missed and ruined
- The biblical picture: a plain moral will plus real freedom within God's unthwartable sovereignty
- A faithful believer walking in wisdom has done God's will, not missed it
- No separate secret blueprint to divine and tragically fail to find
- Guarding the other ditch: our choices genuinely matter and have real consequences
- Freedom from dread is not freedom for carelessness
- Planning as if all depends on diligence, resting as if all depends on God

Discussion Prompts

- Where does the fear of missing God's 'perfect will' come from, and why is it mistaken?
- Why can a believer walking in wisdom not ruin God's plan?
- How is this freedom different from a fatalism that stops taking our choices seriously?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across Proverbs 16:1–9 and Romans 8:28. We plan; God establishes our steps and works all things for the good of those who love Him. 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 more" is a fine start, but press toward the specific: trust Him with which decision or memory, expressed how, beginning when. The comfort of providence is meant to settle a real anxiety this week.

Walk back through the movement of the passages as a prompt. Proverbs held together our genuine planning and God's sovereign establishing of our steps and called us to commit our work to Him; Romans assured us that God works all things for the good of those who love Him. Invite students to ask which of these truths their heart most needs, whether to plan more diligently, to release a tight grip, to lay down fatalism, or to stop second-guessing the past.

Close by recentering on rest and transformation. The aim of this lesson is to free students from both carelessness and torment, settling them into the rest of God's providence so they decide seriously and trust deeply. Encourage each one to carry a single truth into the week, returning to it in prayer, and to lay down one specific fear at the feet of the God who establishes their steps.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at the rest of providence, freeing from carelessness and torment
- Genuine planning held together with God's sovereign establishing
- Deciding seriously and trusting deeply
- Carrying one concrete truth, and laying down one specific fear, this week

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from these passages does your heart most need before your next decision?
- What specific fear, about a future choice or a past one, can you lay down this week?
- How can this group pray for and encourage you in that one specific step?