

Decision Making and the Will of God

Lesson 11: Trust God's Providence: The Lord Establishes His Steps -- Proverbs 16:1-9 (with Romans 8:28)

There is a question that quietly tortures many sincere Christians long after a decision has been made. It comes in the dark, after the choice is final: What if I got it wrong? What if I married the wrong person, took the wrong job, moved to the wrong city, and in doing so stepped off the path of God's perfect will for my life and onto some lesser, second-best track from which I can never quite return? It is a heavy and exhausting way to live, always glancing over the shoulder, wondering whether one fork in the road years ago doomed everything after it. This lesson is, in large part, God's gentle answer to that fear.

We have learned to weigh decisions carefully and then, in the last lesson, to actually make them. Now we come to the truth that makes all of it bearable: the providence of God. Proverbs 16 sets two realities side by side without flinching. On one hand, "The plans of the heart belong to man." We really do plan. We make genuine choices, and we bear genuine responsibility for them. On the other hand, "the answer of the tongue is from the LORD," and, in the great summary verse of the chapter, "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps." We plan; God governs. Both are fully true.

Hold those two together and something wonderful happens to the anxious heart. You are responsible to choose wisely, yes. But you are not responsible to control the outcome, because that belongs to God, and He is good. The Lord is not a distant clockmaker who wound up the universe and walked away, nor a fragile planner whose purposes you can accidentally wreck. He is the sovereign Ruler who establishes the steps of His children, weaving even their stumbles into His good purposes. Joseph could look back on betrayal, slavery, and prison and tell his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

This truth steers between two ditches, and we will name both. On one side is fatalism, the lazy notion that since God controls everything, our choices do not really matter, so why bother deciding well. Scripture will not allow that; our planning is real and our responsibility is real. On the other side is the anxious second-guessing that treats God's will like a tightrope we are always one misstep from falling off. Scripture will not allow that either. Paul gives the anxious heart its resting place: "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good." A faithful believer, walking in wisdom, cannot ruin the plan of an almighty God. So you can decide, and then you can rest. The Lord establishes the steps of those who trust Him.

Group Discussion: Have you ever lain awake wondering whether a past decision knocked you off God's "perfect plan" for your life? Where do you think that fear comes from? As a group, talk about how Proverbs 16:9, that man plans his way but the Lord establishes his steps, speaks to that fear. How can we take our decisions seriously and still rest in God's providence?

Personal Reflection: Is there a decision you have second-guessed, replaying it and wondering if you missed God's will? Or, on the other hand, do you ever use God's sovereignty as an excuse not to decide carefully? Bring your real tendency before God this week. What would it look like to plan responsibly and then rest in the God who establishes your steps?

Read Proverbs 16:1–9 and Romans 8:28

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Proverbs 19:21, many are the plans in the mind of a man, but the purpose of the Lord will stand; Genesis 50:20, Joseph's testimony that what others meant for evil, God meant for good; Romans 8:28, all things working together for good for those who love God; Psalm 139:16, all our days written in God's book before one of them came to be; Ephesians 1:11, the God who works all things according to the counsel of His will

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