

The Attributes of God's Will and Rule

Freedom, Will, Purpose, Providence, Authority, and Lordship

A Teaching Lesson · Seminary-level content, high-school-level clarity

LESSON AT A GLANCE

Big Idea: These attributes describe God as the free, purposeful Ruler of all things. He acts in perfect freedom, wills all that comes to pass, works everything toward His purpose, upholds and governs creation by His providence, and reigns with absolute authority and lordship. A key part of this lesson is learning the three ways Scripture speaks of God's will — His sovereign, preceptive, and dispositional will.

Memory Verse: *"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."* — Psalm 115:3 (ESV)

Contents

PART ONE

Teaching Outline (Leader Notes)

This lesson gathers the attributes that describe God as the free and purposeful Ruler over everything He has made — His freedom, will, purpose, providence, authority, and lordship. These belong closely together: God freely decides what He will do, works it out through providence, and rules over all as Lord. The heart of the lesson is a careful look at the three-fold distinction in God's will, which the church has used for centuries to keep several biblical truths together without confusion. Part One is your full teaching material; Part Two is a handout to copy for students.

I. Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Explain what it means that God is free.
2. Define and distinguish God's sovereign, preceptive, and dispositional will.
3. Explain God's eternal purpose and how providence carries it out.
4. Describe God's authority and lordship over all creation.
5. Apply these truths to trust, obedience, and comfort in daily life.

II. God's Freedom

God is completely free. No one and nothing outside of God forces His hand, advises Him, or limits Him. He was under no obligation to create; He did so freely, for His own good pleasure. "Our God... does all that he pleases" (Psalm 115:3). This freedom is not random — God always acts in perfect agreement with His own holy character. He is free to do all He wills, and He never wills anything unworthy of Himself.

III. The Will of God — Three Ways Scripture Speaks of It

This is the most important section of the lesson. The Bible speaks of God's "will" in more than one sense, and confusing them causes many problems. Theologians have long distinguished three. All three are real; they simply answer different questions.

1. Sovereign Will (also called His decretive or secret will)

This is God's eternal plan — everything He has decreed to bring to pass. It is called "secret" because we do not know it in advance; we learn it as it happens. This will ALWAYS comes to pass and cannot be resisted. "He does according to his will... none can stay his hand" (Daniel 4:35). Nothing occurs outside of it — even sinful acts fall within it, though God is never the author of sin (Acts 2:23).

2. Preceptive Will (His revealed will, or will of command)

This is what God commands us to do — His precepts, revealed in Scripture. It tells us our DUTY. Unlike His sovereign will, this will CAN be disobeyed — people break God's commands every day. "This is the

will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). When we ask, "What is God's will for my life?" in the sense of how to live, this is the will we mean.

3. Dispositional Will (His will of desire, or will of disposition)

This describes what pleases or displeases God — the attitudes and desires of His heart. God takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" and desires that all would turn and live (Ezekiel 33:11). This is not the same as His decree (not all are saved), nor merely a command; it reveals what God delights in and grieves over. It shows us God's heart.

Put them side by side: His sovereign will = what God DECREES will happen. His preceptive will = what God COMMANDS us to do. His dispositional will = what God DESIRES and delights in.

IV. The Three-Fold Will at a Glance

Teach this table slowly — it is the key to reading the word “will” correctly throughout the Bible.

Which will?	Also called	What it is	Can we resist it?
Sovereign	Decretive / secret	God's eternal plan; all He has decreed to happen.	No — always comes to pass.
Preceptive	Revealed / command	What God commands us to do; our duty in Scripture.	Yes — we sin against it.
Dispositional	Desire / disposition	What pleases and delights God; the heart of God.	It reveals His heart.

Why this matters: This distinction lets us hold together truths that seem to clash. God can DECREE that an event occur (sovereign will) while COMMANDING against the sin involved (preceptive will) and genuinely GRIEVING over that sin (dispositional will). The cross is the great example: it happened by God's “definite plan” (Acts 2:23), yet the men who did it truly sinned, and God takes no delight in sin — all true at once.

V. God's Purpose

God has one grand plan, and He never fails to accomplish it. His purpose is fixed, wise, and unstoppable: “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose” (Isaiah 46:10). He works “all things according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11), and the goal of it all is His own glory and the good of His people (Romans 8:28). History is not a random drift; it is God carrying out a plan He set before the world began.

VI. God's Providence

Providence is how God carries out His purpose in the world moment by moment. It has two parts:

- **Preservation** — God keeps all things in existence. He “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3). Nothing continues to exist on its own.
- **Government** — God guides and controls all things toward His ends, from the fall of a sparrow to the rise of nations (Matthew 10:29; Proverbs 21:1). Even free human choices serve His plan.

The great comfort of providence: nothing in your life is outside God's loving control. “For those who love God all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28) — not by accident, but by the hand of a God who rules every detail.

VII. God's Authority and Lordship

Authority

Authority is God's right to command and to be obeyed. Because He is Creator, He owns all things and rightly rules over all. His word is law simply because it is His. "Whatever the LORD pleases, he does" (Psalm 135:6).

Lordship

Lordship is God's rule actually exercised over His creation. "The LORD" (Yahweh) is His covenant name, and "Jesus is Lord" is the earliest Christian confession (Romans 10:9). To call God "Lord" is to bow to His right to rule every part of life. There is no corner of creation — and no corner of your life — where He is not King.

VIII. Common Confusions (and How to Answer Them)

“If God’s sovereign will always happens, why obey His commands?”

Because His command (preceptive will) is our duty, and it is how we know how to live. God’s secret decree is not our business to figure out in advance — our job is to obey what He has clearly revealed. “The secret things belong to the LORD... but the things that are revealed belong to us... that we may do all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29). We live by His revealed will and trust His secret will.

“If God decrees everything, does He cause sin?”

No. God ordains that sinful acts occur (nothing is outside His plan), but He never approves them, never tempts anyone, and holds sinners fully responsible. The men who crucified Jesus acted by God’s “definite plan” and were still guilty of “lawless” hands (Acts 2:23). God works through free choices without becoming the author of their evil.

“If God is in control, does providence make my choices meaningless?”

No — your choices are real and matter. God’s providence works through our decisions, not around them. Joseph told his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20) — one event, real human choices AND real divine purpose. Trusting God’s control does not cancel responsibility; it frees us to act faithfully and rest in Him.

IX. What the Church Has Taught

- **The Reformed and Baptist confessions** teach that God “from all eternity did... freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass,” yet “so as thereby neither is God the author of sin” (Westminster and Second London Baptist Confessions, ch. 3).
- **The distinction between God’s secret and revealed will** goes back to Augustine and was sharpened by the Reformers, especially in reading Deuteronomy 29:29.
- **The Heidelberg Catechism** famously calls providence our “comfort”: that “all things come... not by chance but by his fatherly hand.”

X. The One-Sentence Guardrail

God freely wills and rules all things — decreeing all that comes to pass (sovereign will), commanding our duty (preceptive will), and revealing His heart (dispositional will) — carrying out His unstoppable purpose through providence as the Lord of all.

XI. Why This Matters for Us

- **It gives deep security.** Nothing in your life is random or out of control. A wise, loving Lord governs every detail toward good.
- **It clears up “God’s will for my life.”** Stop trying to unlock the secret decree; focus on obeying the revealed commands. That IS God’s will for you.

- **It calls for surrender.** If God is Lord of all, then He is Lord of every part of your life — your time, money, plans, and future.
- **It comforts us in suffering.** Even hard things come by His fatherly hand and serve His good purpose (Romans 8:28), never outside His rule.

PART TWO

Student Handout

God's Will and Rule — Freedom, Will, Purpose, Providence, Authority, Lordship. Fill in the blanks and follow along as we work through the lesson together.

The Big Idea

God is the free, purposeful Ruler of all things. He freely wills all that happens, works it out through providence, and reigns as Lord over everything. The key skill today: learning the three ways the Bible uses the word "will."

God's Freedom

God does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3). No one forces, advises, or limits Him — and He always acts in keeping with His holy character.

The Three-Fold Will (Learn This!)

Which will?	Also called	What it is	Can we resist?
Sovereign	Decretive / secret	What God PLANS will happen.	No.
Preceptive	Revealed / command	What God COMMANDS us to do.	Yes (we sin).
Dispositional	Desire	What God DELIGHTS in / grieves over.	His heart.

One event can involve all three: the cross was God's PLAN (Acts 2:23), broke His COMMAND (murder), and grieved His HEART (God hates sin) — all at once.

The Rest in Brief

Purpose	God's one grand plan, always accomplished (Isaiah 46:10; Ephesians 1:11).
Providence	God preserves and governs all things moment by moment (Hebrews 1:3).
Authority	God's right to command and be obeyed — because He is Creator.
Lordship	God's rule actually exercised; "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9).

Key Verses

- **Psalm 115:3** — "He does all that he pleases." (Freedom)
- **Deuteronomy 29:29** — secret things vs. revealed things. (Two wills)
- **Isaiah 46:10** — "My counsel shall stand." (Purpose)

- **Romans 8:28** — all things work together for good. (Providence)

Fill in the Blanks

1. God's _____ will is His secret plan — it always comes to pass.
2. God's _____ will is His command — we can (and do) disobey it.
3. God's _____ will reveals His heart — what pleases and grieves Him.
4. God upholds the universe by the word of His _____. (Hebrews 1:3)

Discussion Questions

1. When someone asks “What is God’s will for my life?” which will do they usually mean? Which SHOULD they focus on?
2. How can the cross be God’s plan and still a sin men were guilty of?
3. How does believing in God’s providence change how you face hard times?
4. What part of your life do you still need to hand over to God’s lordship?

One Sentence to Remember

God freely rules all things; we live by His revealed will and rest in His secret one.

This Week

Memorize Psalm 115:3 (or Deuteronomy 29:29). Whenever you catch yourself anxious about the future this week, preach to yourself: my job is to obey what God has revealed, and to trust the plan I cannot see. Then hand one specific worry over to your Lord in prayer.

Sources & Further Study

Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV). Key passages and classic sources referenced in this lesson:

- Scripture: Genesis 50:20; Deuteronomy 29:29; Psalm 115:3; Psalm 135:6; Proverbs 21:1; Isaiah 46:10; Ezekiel 33:11; Daniel 4:35; Matthew 10:29; Acts 2:23; Romans 8:28; Romans 10:9; Ephesians 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 1:3.
- R. C. Sproul, What Is the Will of God? / Chosen by God — the sovereign, preceptive, and dispositional will of God.
- Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), ch. 3 & 5; Second London Baptist Confession (1689), ch. 3 & 5; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 27–28 (providence).
- Augustine, Enchiridion; Stephen Charnock, The Existence and Attributes of God (the dominion and will of God).