

Free Will, Love, *and* Divine Providence



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 13:34; Jer. 32:17–20; Heb. 1:3; Deut. 6:4, 5; Eph. 1:9–11; John 16:33.*

Memory Text: “ ‘These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ ” (*John 16:33, NKJV*).

Providence is the term used to describe God's action in the world. How we think about God's providence makes a huge difference in how we relate to God, how we relate to others, and how we think about the problem of evil.

Christians hold various understandings of divine providence. Some believe that God exercises His power in a way that determines all events to happen just as they do. He even chooses who will be saved and who will be lost! In this view, people are not free to choose other than what God decrees. In fact, people who believe this way argue that even human desires are determined by God.

In contrast, strong biblical evidence shows that God does not determine everything that happens. Instead, He grants humans free will, even to the point where they (and angels) can choose to act directly against His will. The history of the Fall, of sin, and of evil is a dramatic and tragic expression of the results of abusing this free will. The plan of salvation was instituted in order to remedy the tragedy caused by the misuse of free will.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 22.*

Our Sovereign God

“God is sovereign,” the youth pastor taught his middle school group. “That means He controls everything that happens.” One puzzled middle schooler replied, “So God was in control when my dog died? Why would God kill my dog?”

Trying to answer this question, the youth pastor replied: “That’s a tough one. But sometimes God lets us go through hard times so that we’re prepared for even more difficult things in the future. I remember how hard it was when my dog died. But going through that helped me deal with an even more difficult time later when my grandma died. Does that make sense?”

After a long pause, the middle schooler replied, “So God killed my dog to prepare me for when He’s going to kill my grandma?”—Marc Cortez, quoted in John C. Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), p. 141.

People sometimes assume that everything that occurs happens just as God wants it to. Whatever happens in the world is precisely as God wanted to have happen. After all, God is almighty. How, then, could anything occur that God does not want to occur? Hence, no matter what happens, no matter how bad, it was God’s will. That, at least, is what this theology teaches.

Read Psalm 81:11–14; Isaiah 30:15, 18; Isaiah 66:4; and Luke 13:34. What do these texts say about the question of whether God’s will is always being done?

While many people believe that God must always get what He wants, the Bible tells a quite different story. Again and again, Scripture depicts God as experiencing unfulfilled desires. That is, what happens often runs counter to what God states that He actually prefers to happen. In many instances, God explicitly declares that what is happening is the opposite of what He wants. He willed one outcome for His people, but they chose another instead. God Himself laments: “ ‘My people would not heed My voice. . . . Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies’ ” (*Ps. 81:11, 13, 14, NKJV*).

Think through the implications of any theology that attributes everything that happens to God’s direct will. What kind of deep problems, especially in the context of evil, would such a theology create?

Pantokrator

Throughout Scripture, God’s amazing power is made manifest. The Bible includes countless narratives of His exercising His power and working miracles. And yet, despite this, many things happen that God does not want to happen.

Read Revelation 11:17, Jeremiah 32:17–20, Luke 1:37, and Matthew 19:26. Consider also Hebrews 1:3. What do these passages teach about God’s power?

These texts and others teach that God is all-powerful and that He sustains the world by His power. Indeed, Revelation repeatedly refers to God as the “LORD God Almighty” (for example, Rev. 11:17; compare with 2 Cor. 6:18, Rev. 1:8, Rev. 16:14, Rev. 19:15, Rev. 21:22) and the word translated “Almighty” (*pantokrator*) literally means “all-powerful.” The fact that God is all-powerful is not only affirmed in words but also manifest in the many amazing instances in which God uses His power to deliver His people or otherwise miraculously intervenes in the world.

However, to say God is “all-powerful” does not mean that God can do anything whatsoever. Scripture teaches that there are some things God cannot do; for example, 2 Timothy 2:13 declares, God “cannot deny Himself” (NKJV).

Accordingly, most Christians agree that God is all-powerful (omnipotent), meaning that God has the power to do anything that does not involve a contradiction—that is, anything that is logically possible and consistent with God’s nature. That some things are not possible for God because they would involve a contradiction is apparent in Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane. While Christ affirmed that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26), He also prayed to the Father as the crucifixion neared, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Matt. 26:39, NKJV).

Of course, the Father possessed the sheer power to deliver Christ from suffering on the cross, but He could not do this while also saving sinners. It had to be one or the other, not both.

Scripture also teaches that God wants to save everyone (for example, 1 Tim. 2:4–6, Titus 2:11, 2 Pet. 3:9, Ezek. 33:11), but not everyone will be saved. What does this fact teach about the reality of free will and the limits of God’s power with beings granted free will?

To Love God

That God is all-powerful does not mean that He can do the logically impossible. Accordingly, God cannot *causally determine* that someone freely love Him. If *freely* doing something means to do something without being determined to do it, then by definition it is impossible to make someone *freely* do something. In short, as we have seen, and must re-emphasize—God cannot force anyone to love Him, for the moment it's forced, it is no longer love.

Read Matthew 22:37 and Deuteronomy 6:4, 5. What do these verses teach about the reality of free will?

The greatest commandment, to love God, provides evidence that God does, indeed, want everyone to love Him. However, not everyone does love God. Why, then, does God simply not make everyone love Him? Again, that is because love, to be love, must be freely given.

Read Hebrews 6:17, 18 and Titus 1:2. What do these texts teach about God?

According to Numbers 23:19, “ ‘God is not man, that [H]e should lie’ ” (ESV). God never lies (Titus 1:2); God always keeps His word and never breaks a promise (Heb. 6:17, 18). Accordingly, if God has promised or committed Himself to something, His future action is morally limited by that promise.

This means that, insofar as God, in most cases, grants creatures the freedom to choose otherwise than what God prefers; it is not up to God what humans choose. If God has committed Himself to granting creatures free will, humans possess the ability to exercise their freedom in ways that go against God's ideal desires. Tragically, many people do exercise their freedom in this way, and accordingly, there are many things that occur that God wishes did not, but that are not, strictly speaking, up to God.

What have you done that you knew God didn't want you to do? What does this teach about the reality—and possible frightful consequences—of free will?

God's Ideal and Remedial Wills

Read Ephesians 1:9–11. What is this text saying about predestination? Are some people predestined to be saved and others to be lost?

The Greek term translated “predestination” here and elsewhere in Scripture (*prohorizo*) does not itself teach that God causally determines history. Rather, the Greek term simply means “to decide beforehand.”

Of course, one can decide something beforehand unilaterally, or one can decide something beforehand in a way that takes into account the free decisions of others. Scripture teaches that God does the latter.

Here and elsewhere (*for example, Rom. 8:29, 30*), the term translated “predestined” refers to what God plans for the future *after taking into account what God foreknows about the free decisions of creatures*. Thus, God can providentially guide history to His desired good ends for all, even while respecting the kind of creaturely freedom that is required for a genuine love relationship.

Ephesians 1:11 proclaims that God “works all things according to the counsel of His will” (*NKJV*). Does this mean that God determines everything to happen just as He desires? Read in isolation, Ephesians 1:9–11 might seem to affirm this view. However, this interpretation would contradict the many texts we saw earlier that show that people sometimes reject “the will of God” (*Luke 7:30, NKJV; compare with Luke 13:34, Ps. 81:11–14*). If the Bible does not contradict itself, how can these passages be understood in a way that is consistent with one another?

This passage makes perfect sense if one simply recognizes a distinction between what we might call God’s “ideal will” and God’s “remedial will.” God’s “ideal will” is what God actually prefers to occur and which would occur if everyone always did exactly what God desires. God’s “remedial will,” on the other hand, is God’s will that has already taken into account every other factor, including the free decisions of creatures, which sometimes depart from what God prefers. Ephesians 1:11 appears to be referring to God’s “remedial will.”

So powerful is God’s foreknowledge of the future that, even knowing all the choices, including the bad choices, that people will make, He can still work “all things together for good” (*Rom. 8:28, CEB*). What comfort can you draw from this truth?

Christ Has Overcome the World

If everything occurred according to God's ideal will, there would never have been evil but only the perfect bliss of love and harmony. Eventually, the universe will be restored to this perfect, ideal will of God. In the meantime, God is working out His will in a way that takes into account the free decisions of His creatures.

Imagine a baking competition in which all participants are required to use some particular set of ingredients, but they can add any other ingredients they want in order to bake any kind of cake they want, as well. In the end, whatever cake a baker ends up making will be determined, at least partially, by some ingredients that the baker did not choose.

Similarly (in this limited respect), because God has committed Himself to respecting creaturely freedom of the kind necessary for love, many of the "ingredients" that make up world history are not chosen by God but are actually the opposite of what God desires.

In this view, divine providence is not simply one-dimensional, as if God unilaterally controls everything that happens. Rather, this requires (at least) a two-dimensional view of God's providence. Some things in this world are caused by God, but other occurrences are the result of the free decisions of creatures (as are all evils). Many things happen that God does not want to happen.

Read John 16:33. What hope, even amid tribulations, does this text offer us?

Particularly in times of suffering or trial, people's faith may waver because they hold the mistaken belief that God will or should spare them from suffering and trials in this life. But Jesus tells us a very different story, warning His followers they will experience trials and tribulations in this world, but there is hope, for Christ has overcome the world (*John 16:33*).

The fact that we encounter suffering and trials does not mean that this is what God ideally wants for us. We must always keep in mind the big picture: the great controversy. However, we can be confident that, while evil itself is not necessary for good, God can bring good even out of evil events. And, if we trust God, God can use even our sufferings to draw us closer to Him and to motivate us to be compassionate and to care for others.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “‘God With Us,’” pp. 19–26, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The plan for our redemption was not an afterthought, a plan formulated after the fall of Adam. It was a revelation of ‘the mystery which hath been kept in silence through times eternal.’ Rom. 16:25, R. V. It was an unfolding of the principles that from eternal ages have been the foundation of God’s throne. From the beginning, God and Christ knew of the apostasy of Satan, and of the fall of man through the deceptive power of the apostate. God did not ordain that sin should exist, but He foresaw its existence, and made provision to meet the terrible emergency. So great was His love for the world, that He covenanted to give His only-begotten Son, ‘that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ John 3:16.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 22.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 If God does not always get what He wants, how does this fact impact the way you think about what occurs in this world? What are the practical implications of understanding that God has unfulfilled desires?
- 2 If we go back to the cake analogy in Thursday’s study, we can understand why, even though “God and Christ knew of the apostasy of Satan,” they went ahead and created us anyway. Love had to be in the mix, and love meant freedom. Rather than not create us as beings able to love, God created us so that we could love, but He did so knowing that, ultimately, it would lead Jesus to the cross. What should it tell us about how sacred, how fundamental, love was to God’s government that Christ would suffer on the cross rather than deny us the freedom inherent in love?
- 3 Often we lament the evil and suffering in this world, but how often do you take time to ponder that God Himself laments and is grieved by suffering and evil? What difference does it make to your understanding of evil and suffering when you recognize that God Himself suffers because of evil?
- 4 How does this truth—that many things happen in this world that God does not will—help you deal with your own suffering, especially when it doesn’t make sense and seems to lead to no good at all?

From Rumba to Church

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

As a boy, Nelson was too young to go to rumba in Colombia. But he sensed something was wrong when his parents took him to church on December 31 and then left him at home so they could celebrate New Year's Eve at rumba, a traditional party with music, dancing, and drinking.

In Nelson's culture, Christians went to church to consecrate themselves to God before New Year's Eve and then went to rumba to ring in the New Year. Although he was young, Nelson sensed that church was a holy place and that rumba, which was usually held in bars and nightclubs, was not holy. He wondered, "Why does my family go to church to get sanctified and then go to rumba to get unsanctified?"

Nelson asked his mother, "Why do you go to church and then to rumba?"

She didn't answer.

As a young man, Nelson stopped going to church and began to play *val-lenato* folk music at rumba. He was an excellent accordion player, and he made strides toward fulfilling a dream to become rich and famous.

Then he met his future wife, Laura, a former Seventh-day Adventist. "Did you know that the dead are not in heaven?" she asked.

Nelson didn't like Laura's ideas, but he liked her. So, they stayed together.

After some time, Laura returned to the Adventist Church, and she invited Nelson to meet her parents. At their first meeting, her father surprised Nelson when they sat down to eat. "Let's pray for the food," he said. Nelson had never prayed before meals.

Nelson and Laura's father became friends. Before long, Nelson started to pray at meals. He also began to go to church with Laura. He didn't enjoy it at first because it seemed strange to go to church on Saturdays. But then he read the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8–10 and realized that God commanded people to keep the seventh day holy. He wanted to be holy.

Today, Nelson Silva, 30, is an Adventist musician who no longer plays the accordion at rumba. Instead, he plays in restaurants and at birthday parties. He tells listeners about God's mercy and prays for them. He and a group of church musicians also play on public buses.

"Music made me shine in the world, but now I want to shine for Christ," he said.



Pray for the gospel to be proclaimed to all cultures and people groups around the world. Thank you for your mission offerings that help share the gospel with unreached and underreached people groups. Watch a YouTube video of Nelson playing the accordion at bit.ly/Nelson-Silva.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *John 16:33*

Study Focus: *Ps. 81:11–14, Luke 7:30, Luke 13:34, Titus 1:2, Heb. 6:18.*

Introduction: While God is omnipotent and sovereign, He does not determine everything that happens. Moreover, there are things that God will not do, and cannot do, from the standpoint of the nature of His moral character. Yet, divine providence can indeed transform a terrible situation into a blessing.

Lesson Themes: This week's lesson emphasizes three main ideas:

1. God's sovereignty does not exclude unfulfilled desires. God does not determine everything that happens. Even though He is all-powerful, God commits Himself morally to human free will. Consequently, not everything that happens is in accordance with His desires, considering the decisions of morally free creatures. God is sovereign in the sense that He accomplishes His providential purpose (ideal will) and takes into account the free decisions of His creatures, which can be contrary to what He prefers (remedial will).
2. God's omnipotence does not mean that His providential actions have no limits. There are things that God will not do, and cannot do, from the standpoint of His moral character. This notion is significant for our understanding of divine providence in the world. God's providential actions are consistent with His love and are not determined or forced. But His providential actions do not overrule free human choice. Thus, God's omnipotence does not rule out the free will of His creatures.
3. Divine providence includes ideal and remedial actions. God's providential actions are not defined only in terms of ideal will, based exactly on what God desires, but involve remedial actions. Remedial actions depart from what God prefers for His creatures. Even so, God may transform a situation that is against His moral will into something that is aligned with His moral/ideal desire.

Life Application: Is everything that happens in our life the result of God's will? Why, or why not? What have you learned about divine providence from the story of Joseph?

Part II: Commentary

1. God's Sovereignty Does Not Exclude Unfulfilled Desires.

One of the key questions debated in *Four Views on Divine Providence* is whether God always gets “what He wants.” To put it more pointedly, this question poses the challenge of how to “reconcile human beings’ moral responsibility with God’s sovereignty over their acts.”—Dennis W. Jowers, ed., *Four Views on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), p. 10. If the answer to the question is positive (yes, God always gets what He wants), then no one is able to do something different from what God desires, and consequently, everything that happens in the world is in accordance with His desires, including the occurrences of evil. But this picture is contrary to God’s loving benevolence and to the moral freedom of His creatures, as observed in Scripture (see John Peckham, “Providence and God’s Unfulfilled Desires,” *Philosophia Christi* 15, no. 2 [2013]: p. 234).

There are several places in Scripture where we find people, even God’s people, acting differently from what God desires. In Psalm 81:11–14, a psalm in which God appeals to Israel’s repentance, the Lord complains that His people do “not heed” His “voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels. Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries’ ” (*NKJV*). Likewise, in Isaiah 66:4, the Lord sadly underlines that when He “ ‘called, no one answered, when I spoke they did not hear; but they did evil before My eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight’ ” (*NKJV*).

In Ezekiel 18:23, God emphasizes that He does not have any pleasure in the death of the wicked. Rather, His desire is that the wicked may repent and live. In the Gospels, we are told that “the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves” (*Luke 7:30, NKJV*). Similarly, Jesus laments over Jerusalem for living in rebellion against His desires. “ ‘How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!’ ” (*Luke 13:34, NKJV*).

This biblical picture indicates that God’s sovereignty in the world does not exclude the existence of unfulfilled divine desires, considering the decisions of His morally free creatures. At the same time, God is still sovereign, and as Job underscores, “ ‘no purpose of Yours can be thwarted’ ” (*Job 42:2, NASB1995*). Peckham suggests that “God does not always get what he wants (his ideal will) yet God will certainly accomplish his all-encompassing and omnibenevolent providential purpose (his effective will).”—*Philosophia Christi*, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 236. More specifically, “God voluntarily opened himself up to the temporary

discontent brought about by evil. God is nevertheless content in the overarching sense that his purpose will ultimately be fulfilled and bring maximal contentment to the entire universe in eternally harmonious love relationship.”—Page 235.

2. God’s Omnipotence Does Not Mean That His Providential Actions Have No Limits.

As the Almighty God, the Lord can do anything. Nothing is impossible for Him (*Gen. 18:14, Mark 14:36, Luke 18:27*). So, from the standpoint of power and freedom, God can do anything. However, from the standpoint of the nature of His moral character and His free decisions regarding the existence and reality of the created world, there are things that God will not do and, in this sense, cannot do. It is from this perspective that Scripture affirms that God cannot do certain things. For instance, He “cannot lie” (*Titus 1:2; see also Heb. 6:18*), He “cannot be tempted by evil” (*James 1:13, NKJV*), and “He cannot deny Himself” (*2 Tim. 2:13, NKJV*).

This concept of God’s moral character is important for our understanding of divine providence, that is, of God’s actions in the world. While He has the power and the freedom to do anything in His providence, His providential actions are delimited by the moral nature of His character and decisions. Ellen G. White highlights that “God never forces the will or the conscience” of His creatures (*The Great Controversy*, p. 591). In *Steps to Christ*, she mentions that “Christ is ready to set us free from sin, but He does not force the will; and if by persistent transgression the will itself is wholly bent on evil, and we do not *desire* to be set free, if we *will* not accept His grace, what more can He do? We have destroyed ourselves by our determined rejection of His love.”—Page 34.

This principle means that, because of His loving character, God’s omnipotence does not rule out the free will of His creatures. His providential actions do not force the conscience, which explains why He lovingly appeals to our minds to choose life, not death (*Deut. 30:15–20*), and to not harden our hearts to His voice (*Heb. 3:7, 8*). Even though He desires the salvation of all (*Ezek. 33:11, 1 Tim. 2:4–6, Titus 2:11, 2 Pet. 3:9*), the Bible does not teach that everyone will be saved (*see, for example, Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:28, 29*).

God’s providential activity is consistent with His love. By definition, a loving relationship cannot be determined or forced, but necessarily implies free choice. As the source of love (*1 John 4:7, 8*), God does not force or determine our love, but He expresses His deep love for us with the desire to instill His love in us (*John 3:16, 1 John 4:19*). According to 1 John 4:19, “we love Him because He first loved us” (*NKJV*). A genuine love for God

is founded in a personal conviction about His loving and just character. As Ellen G. White beautifully puts it: “Only the service of love can be acceptable to God, the allegiance of His creatures must rest upon a conviction of His justice and benevolence.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 42.

3. Divine Providence Includes Ideal and Remedial Actions.

Taking into account that God’s sovereignty does not exclude unfulfilled desires and that His omnipotence does not mean that His providential actions force the decisions of His creatures, divine providence should not be defined only in terms of ideal actions, which derive from God’s ideal will or desire. Considering that many situations are caused by the decisions of creatures that are incompatible with the moral will of God, several providential actions are more precisely understood as remedial actions, in the sense that God transforms a situation that is against His moral will into something that is aligned with His moral/ideal desire.

The notion of remedial providential action is particularly observed in the history of Joseph. He interprets the ambiguity of his painful, yet astonishing, life journey as paradoxically influenced by both human evil intentions and divine loving providence. The former does not preclude the latter. The latter does not justify the former. In Genesis 50:20, Joseph says to his brothers, “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (*NKJV*). In short, God’s providence transforms a miserable situation, resulting from the unjustifiable evil intentions and actions of human beings, into a blessing that we could never foresee.

Ellen G. White uses the language of overruling to describe God’s remedial providence: “It was envy that moved the brothers of Joseph to sell him as a slave; they hoped to prevent him from becoming greater than themselves. And when he was carried to Egypt, they flattered themselves that they were to be no more troubled with his dreams, that they had removed all possibility of their fulfillment. *But their own course was overruled by God* to bring about the very event that they designed to hinder.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 239; emphasis supplied.

Part III: Life Application

Even though we do not always follow God’s desires for our lives, He can transform any terrible situation into a blessing. Based on this point, discuss with your students the following questions:

1. What needs to be changed in our lives so that we can be dependent upon God's will in our spiritual journey? How can we seek to make sure our free choices do not clash with God's will?

2. Our spiritual failure does not affect God's love for us. How does this wonderful truth motivate us in preaching the gospel?

3. How can we explain to small children, in appropriate ways, that not everything that happens is God's direct will?

Notes
