

## THE COMPASS

Phoenix, Arizona

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### ***FUTURE TENSE? Figuring Out God's Will***

#### **Part 1:**

## **The Tale of the Kindly King**

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Once upon a time there was a large kingdom, with a kindly king who had incredible powers.

He even had the power to predict the future.

Among his many incredible powers was the power to bestow any of his powers upon his subjects whenever he wanted to.

This was very fortunate for the subjects of this kingdom, because while the king had an incredible array of powers, the people of the kingdom had none at all.

At first, they were all simply blank slates.

They couldn't speak, they couldn't see or hear, they couldn't move or even think.

So at the very beginning of his reign, this kindly king decided to give his subjects quite an assortment of powers: the power to think and move and see and hear and speak, and even the power to *learn*.

In fact, the kindly king gave his subjects almost every power he had, except for the power to predict the future — because he knew that would just make them crazy.

Plus — the king also decided to set up his kingdom so that his subjects could use all these amazing powers enjoyably. Remember, this was a kindly king.

So he arranged his kingdom to be regulated according to certain reliable systems — physical laws, so his subjects could interact enjoyably with the world that the king had created for them; and moral laws, so his subjects could interact enjoyably with him and with each other — and as a result, they could establish cities and towns and farms, they could invent music and games and do interesting experiments.

But something was missing.

The entire kingdom was set up perfectly, everything could operate very smoothly — but it wasn't fun or engaging.

Then one day the king was reading a book of science fiction, and he came across a word that suddenly made him realize what the problem was in his own kingdom.

"Robots!" he said to himself. "My subjects are *robots*."

His subjects couldn't decide anything for themselves.

They could obey the king's decrees and do the king's bidding — but big deal. They had no choice.

They weren't deciding for themselves that the king was a good guy, and doing things his way because his way was really the best way.

They were just going through the motions.

So that very day, the kindly king — after carefully marking the page in his book of science fiction and closing it up and setting it on his nightstand next to his reading glasses — at that very moment, the kindly king made a very dramatic royal decision: he decided to bestow upon every subject, in his entire realm, the power to choose.

This was risky — because it meant that his subjects could follow the king's decrees, or reject them.

It meant they could work within the laws the king had set up for them, and enjoy life, or they could work outside these laws, and hurt themselves, and hurt each other.

But the king decided to go for it, because he wanted his subjects to be able to experience the thrill of choosing — deciding for themselves — and frankly, the kindly king also wanted his subjects to be able to appreciate him. To see the value of what he was doing for them. He wanted them to be able to love him — and without the power to choose, they couldn't, really.

And as the days unfolded, as the subjects of the kingdom exercised their power to choose, many of them did indeed decide to live life the way the king had arranged for their lives to be lived, and they had a pretty good time. Not perfect, but pretty good. Even on bad days, they knew that the kindly king was looking out for them, and available for them.

Many other subjects, however, using this wonderful “power to choose,” decided to live life other ways — and while they had a pretty good time too, they also ran into the extra problems that the king had warned them all along they would run into if they bucked the royal system.

Gravity, for example. There was no getting around the law of gravity. A couple people jumped from the castle wall and fell right into the moat; it was not pretty.

And the kindly king's moral laws, too — there was no getting around those. One young man decided to see what would happen if he could get around “Thou shalt not steal,” but when his dad caught him across town with the Toyota, he beat the living daylights out of him.

On the other hand, the subjects of the kingdom discovered that the power to choose gave them not only the power to love the kindly king, but to love each other — and when they loved each other, they enjoyed life even more.

Sadly, of course, the power to choose also gave people the power to hate the kindly king, and hate each other.

This made things complicated.

The father who caught his son across town in the stolen Toyota was so frustrated that after he whipped his kid, he marched into the royal palace and demanded to see the king.

When he got into the throne room, he was still hopping mad.

“Look, Your Highness,” the father began, “I know you're supposed to be kindly and all that, but you've got the power to predict the future. You knew my kid was going to steal the family Toyota. Why didn't you give me a call and warn me so I could stop him? Is your cell phone out of minutes?”

And the moment the words were out of his mouth, the angry father wished he could take

it back.

It's one thing to march into the throne room of the king and question his leadership, but to get all sarcastic — especially about the king still using a prepaid cell phone — he knew he had gone too far.

But the kindly king was, amazingly, still kindly.

He smiled sadly and shook his head and said to the angry father, “Have you enjoyed the power to choose?”

“Well, yeah,” the angry father replied.

“Would you be open to giving back your power to choose?” the king asked.

The father just looked at him.

“See,” the kindly king said, “the day I gave you the power to choose, I also gave your son — and every other subject in this kingdom — the power to choose.

I haven't taken that power back from anybody.

I've wanted to, believe me.

But I haven't done it.

You know why?

Because remember last September, when you and your son were playing racquetball that day, and afterward he said to you, ‘Dad, thanks for being such a good dad’ — remember that?

When he said, ‘I know it's not cool for a teenager to say it, but I really do love you’ — remember that?

In fact, all those times when your son has loved you — you know what?

That was him using his power to choose.

Yes, I looked into the future, and yes, and I saw the stolen Toyota.

But when I looked at that moment on the racquetball court, I decided it was worth a Toyota.

At the very least, a used Toyota wasn't worth taking away his power to love his dad.”

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The kingdom of the kindly king is the world you and I live in.

Sometimes we get so frustrated by the bad stuff that happens in the world, we get frustrated with God “letting it happen,” that our view of how life has been set up gets kind of skewed — and maybe we need a fairy tale to simplify it all, and make it clear for us again.

God is omniscient — **Acts 15:18** says he knows all his own stuff, **1 Chronicles 28:9** says he knows all our stuff, right down to the motives behind our thoughts; and **1 John 3:20** just wraps up the whole question by saying God “**knows all things.**” Period.

So God is all-knowing — he can predict my future.

But I have free will.

How do the two jibe?

There are certainly many mysteries we can't fathom, as mere human beings.

But there are some facets of these mysteries that we can see.

If we were paint the picture another way — not as a fairy tale, but simply in bullet points,

in lecture form — it might look more like this:

***Bullet point #1. To know in advance is not the same as causing in advance.***

People often accuse God — since he knows what’s coming — of causing stuff. But even we humans predict the future all the time — yet this doesn’t mean that we caused the stuff we predicted.

You see a grade schooler playing with a loaded gun.

You say to yourself: someone’s going to get hurt.

You’ve predicted the future; but you didn’t cause it.

God sees bad stuff in the future that he doesn’t cause.

He didn’t cause bad guys to kill his prophets, and he knew this would happen, but he sent his prophets anyway — **Matthew 23:37** says so.

And Jesus knew that people would reject him, but he came to earth anyway.

In **Acts 21:10-14**, the apostle Paul is told that he will be bound if he goes to Jerusalem — but he goes anyway because he has people to help by going there.

Just knowing something ahead of time doesn’t mean you caused it.

God sees the future, but he doesn’t “do” bad things to us.

***Bullet point #2. God isn’t limited by time.***

We can barely fathom this.

God exists in the future and in the past as well as in the present.

This is why you get brain-bending statements in the Scripture like Jesus saying “**Before Abraham was born, I am!**” (**John 8:58**).

The Catholic writer Peter Vardy pictures God as sitting on a mountain, looking down on the stream of time — and from up there he can see the mouth of the stream and the source of the stream all at once.

Time doesn’t pass for him, because all of time is right there in front of him, simultaneously.

***Bullet point #3. The only way Romans 8:28 can be true — God working in all things for the good of those who love him — is if God knows what the outcome of our decisions will be.***

He gives me the choice — it’s totally mine — but since he knows what move I’m going to make, he can plan accordingly.

(In this same way, he will always win at chess.)

***Bullet point #4. What all of this means is, when I have to make a decision, I can relax.***

Why? Because God already knows not only the outcome of my decision, but also the ramifications of the decision I’m going to make.

He has all the cards — he is committed to my well being — and living in the future as he does, he has already prepared the way.

***Bullet point #5. The very term “free will” is a misnomer.***

If my will were truly free, I would not have any influences or pressures or even impulses to sort out.

I would make every decision in a complete vacuum.

But I don’t. I can’t.

The reality is, every decision I make is made as the result of multiple influences, an array of pressures, and based on a host of impressions and impulses in my head and heart.

Free will isn't really about freedom at all.

It's about responsibility.

My God-given power to choose is what I interpret as free will.

Actually, it's not free at all — it's a tangle of these influences, pressures, and impulses — but it *is* a matter of responsibility.

To be accurate, I should say I have a "responsible will."

We can see this clearly when we compare ourselves to animals.

Animals aren't able to consider alternate possibilities — they're not free to choose.

They're hard-wired with instincts that make these decisions; they respond biologically to various stimuli.

Now here's something strange: God gives me such total "choosing power" that I even have the freedom to live like the animals.

I can just go with my instincts.

I can consume food and pursue sexual pleasure and take whatever I want whenever I want it — and live with the consequences.

But by God's gift of what we call free will, I also have the option of living above those basic instincts.

I can make choices contrary to my instincts, contrary to my feelings.

I can step outside myself and make a decision from there — in other words, I can disagree with myself.

I can argue with myself.

I can have conflicting feelings.

I can even desire for my desires to change.

This is unique to us as human beings — and it's a gift from God.

***Bullet point #6. God knows about evil before it happens, but he's not obligated to stop it.***

Many people take God to task for this — but this complaint misses a crucial point.

Wherever God steps in and interrupts my free use of my will, he is decreasing my humanity.

If he interrupted all of our choices and made our decisions for us, we would become the robots of the fairy tale.

But in the realm of the kindly king, in this human life-realm, I have the freedom to live however I want.

These freedoms define my humanity; they're what make me human.

***Bullet point #7. It's the power to choose that gives me the power to love.***

You might put a gun to my head and force me to obey you, but no matter what motions you make me go through, you won't feel authentic love from me — because the only authentic love is *freely given*.

But because we're free to choose love, we're also free to choose hate.

You literally cannot have one without the other. That's what "choice" is. And this is why there's evil in the world.

***Bullet point #8. With freedom comes responsibility.***

My decisions, freely made, have certain consequences.

OK, here comes a decision point in my life. How will I decide? I'm free to choose — but what are the consequences going to be? I want to know!

The way God wired me, I feel fear and I feel desire.

Fear is when my motivation is not to mess something up, not to create pain in my life.

Desire is when my motivation is to get things to go well, to gain something of value — maybe money, maybe a relationship, maybe esteem, or whatever.

Now, in many areas of life, God tells me how to live.

In some areas, he warns me that certain actions will lead me to ruin — so he appeals to my natural "fear" instinct.

In other areas, he assures me that certain actions will lead me to "abundant life" — so he appeals to my natural "desire" instinct.

Certainly I want to avoid pain; I want good things.

So I'm interested in God's thoughts about how I should live.

But in a lot of areas, he's not specific about what choices will lead me to ruin and what choices will lead me to "abundant life."

Whether to take a smaller apartment or not — whether to skip to that new job that someone has offered me — whether to marry a certain cute girl — there's nothing in Scripture for me on these subjects.

I want to know "God's will for my life" in these areas.

I want to maximize the good and minimize the bad.

And since God knows the future, I want that knowledge!

But here's the problem: if I knew the outcome of every decision, if I could see pain coming, I would seek to change things.

I would do time travel, I would do *Back to the Future*, whatever it took to alter the events in my own little life — but without realizing how any *one* of my decisions would impact a million other people.

So God, wisely, doesn't let me mess with other people.

He knows just my messing with my own situation is more than enough work for me, and creates more than enough complications for other people!

***Bullet point #9. I can't see the future, but worrying is pointless, because the outcome may just as well be good as bad.***

I tend to have the feeling that because I'm not in control, something bad will happen.

God's perspective is, Hey, if Doug Brendel were in control, it could be even worse. In fact, it *would* be.

***Bullet point #10. In lots of situations, something I define as "negative" is really God's best — I just can't see the big picture.***

The terrible reality of life is that pain and displeasure are as much a part of it as ecstasy and joy.

I think I want a life of no pain, but that's not life.

Feeling no pain is a disease: it's called leprosy.

Jesus healed that disease. He gave people the gift of pain.

The bottom line of this mini-lecture would be this:

Free will means I can choose to see even painful events as gifts from God; I can choose to trust his heart, trust his promise.

In other words, I can rest. I can have peace — because even when life doesn't make sense to me, I know that God sees the future, and he's accomplishing his total, overall best, in my life and in the lives of all the rest of his children too.

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Well, maybe we have time for one more fairy tale.

If we were in the business of writing fairy tales, we might take the story we started earlier and finish it like this.

Not only was there a large kingdom, with a kindly king who had incredible powers. There was also another large kingdom, with another king who had incredible powers. But while the kindly king in the first kingdom decided to give his subjects the power to choose, but not the power to predict the future, the king in *this* kingdom decided to do exactly the opposite.

He gave his subjects the power to predict the future, but not the power to choose.

These people turned out like robots — they didn't have any choice in any situation, they just had to do whatever their king decided; they were in total bondage to him — but they could always see the outcome of these motions they were going through.

In some cases, if they thought the outcome was bad, they would go through the motions horrified, filled with dread, knowing how bad it was going to be in the end.

In other cases, if they thought the outcome was good, since they didn't have any say in the matter, they would go through the motions bored, without any excitement or anticipation for the future.

What the subjects of this second kingdom discovered was that the power to predict the future, without the power to choose, made for a very unpleasant life.

You know, I've wanted to live in this kingdom.

I've said to myself, Hey, the power to choose is not worth it.

I would rather have things more orderly. My life is just too chaotic.

If I knew what was coming — now *that* would be valuable.

But God says, Doug, if you knew what was coming, you would urgently want to choose otherwise — and without the power to choose, you'd be more frustrated than you are now.

Better that I give you the power to choose, the power to love — and kind of a blind spot when it comes to predicting the future.

And you know what? If we want to be brutally honest about this, my dream of trading away my power to choose in favor of the power to predict the future is Satan's dream for my life.

This seems like an overstatement, but I think it's literally true.

If he could, Satan would make me his robot — doing his bidding, with no say in the matter; he would totally strip me of my power to choose — and then just to torture me, he would tell me all the bad stuff, just like he tries to do now.

Accusing me, reminding me of my faults — **Revelation 12:10** says he's "**the accuser.**" He would make me watch the video screen of my future.

His dream for my life is a bad dream. A scary story.

God has dreamed a beautiful dream for me. A lovely story.

No, there's no predicting the future — and that's a gift from him to me.

I just have the power to choose. Another — quite wonderful — gift from him to me.

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But then we might add one more chapter to the fairy tale.

Let's say there was a third king, who was watching the first two kings, and he said to himself, Hey, I'm not going to make the same mistake that either of these guys made.

One guy gives the power to choose, but retains the power to predict the future.

The other guy gives the power to predict the future, but retains the power to choose.

I'm going to be better than either of these two kings, this third king says.

I'm going to give my subjects both — the power to choose, *and* the power to predict the future.

So he types up the decree on his iBook G4, prints copies out on his Epson color laser printer, he sends out his messengers hither and yon, across the kingdom, to give the decree to all his subjects:

At noon this Sunday, every subject of my kingdom will suddenly acquire the power to choose *and* the power to predict the future.

Everybody's all excited, Sunday approaches, the stroke of 12 — bang. Wow.

Everybody's suddenly imbued with the power to choose and the power to predict the future.

The other two kings, in the other two kingdoms, are sitting up in the clock towers of their own castles, looking across the valley toward this third kingdom — watching, waiting, kind of feeling a little jealous; like now this third king is going to go down in history as the kindest king of all, the most generous king of all, the wisest and best king of all.

They're both sitting there in their respective clock towers for the better part of an hour. Finally, as the one o'clock hour approaches, the first king starts to feel hungry. He's thinking about going to the fridge and seeing if there's anything there to make a sandwich.

The second king, meanwhile, looks at his wristwatch and realizes the football game is about to start.

So as it turns out, both of them happen to turn away from their windows at the same time — and exactly at that moment: kaboom!

There's an enormous explosion — they both turn back to their windows, and there,



across the valley, is a huge mushroom cloud.  
The third kingdom has been blown to bits.

Pretty soon the third king comes staggering out; he's all blackened and bruised, he's picking bits of castle wall concrete out of his beard.

And eventually the story comes out.

It didn't work.

Everybody in the kingdom had the power to predict the future.

And everybody also had the power to choose.

When anybody saw their own future and didn't like it, then they used their power of choice to change their plan.

But when anybody else saw *that* new plan in *their* future and *they* didn't like it, they used their power of choice to change the plan *again*.

Everybody was looking into the future, finding stuff they didn't like, and changing the plan.

Faster and faster and faster.

It took barely an hour for the system to melt down — and kaboom!

What had the third king done? He had created a kingdom full of gods.

Everybody had total power — it was impossible — there can only be one God.

There can only be one all-knowing, all-powerful being to sort out the infinite choices, and bring about a single, unified experience.

We need our God.

We need exactly the kind of God we got.

We are fortunate that we got a kindly God ... one who works for our good in all things.

One who's willing to get down into the muck and the mire of our bad choices, and still make sure that the ultimate good comes out of it all.

Does this bend your brain?

Mine too.

Let's pray.

*God, help us understand; and if we can't understand, then at least help us accept.*

*Accept your love. Accept your provision. Accept your superior wisdom.*