

THE POWER OF RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS

Ruth 1:22-2:13

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According to legend, American writer Anne Herbert scribbled the exhortation, “Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty” on a placemat at a Sausalito, California, restaurant in 1982. The sentiment has since been popularized through film and literature and has become part of our cultural vocabulary. As I read about the source of this quote, questions came to mind. One was, “Why did this directive to practice kindness hit the core of so many people’s hearts?”

The answer should be obvious even to the person who casually mingles with others. As you get close to those around you, you quickly become aware that there is a deep river of pain, rejection, and shame running beneath the surface of all of our lives. At times, this pain causes us to wonder, “Does anyone really care about me?”

This leads to a second question: “As followers of Jesus, why should we show kindness to others?” Again, the answer is clear. Whether voiced or unvoiced, the purpose of practicing kindness for the Christian is to show the tender mercy and loving kindness of God our Savior, Jesus Christ.

This morning, we are going to witness from our text the practice of small human gestures of kindness and how God can use them in the lives of others who come across our path. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to the small book of **Ruth**, in the Old Testament, to **1:22**. If you didn’t happen to bring yours with you, just nudge the person next to you and share theirs. Or, if you look under a seat around you, you will find a Bible you can use. In addition, if you are new to the Bible and don’t have a clue where the book of **Ruth** is, do what I used to do. Look in the Table of Contents in the front of the Bible, find the Old Testament, and look for the page number where the book begins. Then, just trace your way down to **verse 22**.

While we are all getting there, let me remind you where we are in our story. We have just finished the first Act. Naomi has returned to her home of Bethlehem after fifteen years. When she left, she was married, had two sons,

and was young and provided for. When she returned, she did so as a destitute widow and childless mother, feeling that God had turned against her.

In addition, Ruth, her son's widow, was with her. She was a young woman who had made a commitment to leave her home and family so as to look after and care for her mother-in-law, Naomi. Amazingly Ruth, formerly a Moabitess and worshiper of the gods of Moab, had turned away from those gods and become a follower of Yahweh.

We begin our reading with **1:22**, which functions as a transition in the story between Act 1 and Act 2 or **chapter 2** of **Ruth**. You will see that after **2:2** in our study, Naomi will disappear from the scene for the major portion of **chapter 2**, resurfacing only at the end of the chapter to have the final word. Hence, the main female character shifts from the mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law, Ruth.

²²So Naomi returned and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest. ¹Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.

In **verse 22**, the writer reminds us that Ruth is a Moabite woman. This alien status underlies much of the tension that will surface in the story. As a Moabite in an Israelite world she had little reason to expect the acceptance of the Israelite townsfolk. She was facing an uphill battle, a challenge to try to make her way to provide for herself and her mother-in-law.

The author also points out that the season when Naomi and Ruth happened to show up in Bethlehem was the barley harvest. The timing was critical, for it meant that Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, "the house of bread," just when the grain for bread was ready to be cut. That would make our scene take place in late March or early April. Since barley was the first crop to be harvested each year, the timing of their arrival meant that Naomi and Ruth

could get settled immediately and would have a high probability of finding enough food so as not to starve their first year home. Hence, the author's mentioning of this barley harvest brings a hint of hope to the first Jewish readers of this book.

In **2:1**, the narrator introduces a new character, Boaz. We learn several important details about him. First, he was a "**kinsman**" of Naomi's husband.

Second, he was a "**man of great wealth.**" This Hebrew expression has a broader meaning than that Boaz was simply a wealthy man. Elsewhere it is used to describe a man of noble character, influence, and high respect. He was well-known in religious circles. It pointed to a man of faith and spiritual integrity. In short, Boaz was no ordinary, run-of-the-mill Israelite.¹

By using this expression to describe Boaz, the author is setting the stage for him to be the hero. He is one who stands in contrast to Naomi, who lacks faith, standing, and resources.

When we put together the terms "**kinsman**" and "**relative**" of Elimelech, the author is also preparing us for how this hero might perform in the drama. He was perfectly positioned to be the rescuer of Naomi's family heritage, as the "**kinsman redeemer.**"

From this point forward, the second Act begins. It is made up of three scenes, all of which take place in one twenty-four hour period. In this second Act, our hero, Boaz, and other star female, Ruth, met for the first time. In the next two verses, our first scene begins with Ruth stepping up and taking the initiative to meet the deep needs of her small household.

She realized that if they were going to gather enough food to survive the future, she couldn't waste time. She was not looking for people to give her a handout. Instead, she was looking for work or for an honest way to make ends meet.

¹ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 651). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

²And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.” ³So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

Once again, notice that the author stresses that Ruth is a “**Moabite**.” This reflects the extraordinary nature of her action as an alien in a foreign land, determined to make something of her life.²

Ruth came up with a plan to glean ears of grain out in the fields surrounding the village. The verb “**glean**” is used ten times in this opening scene of **chapter 2**. This many uses of any term in such a short literary space emphasizes and reminds the reader that what is about to happen to Ruth was needed for her survival.

Furthermore, it is essential for us to remember what role the Mosaic Law (**Exodus 22:22-24; Deuteronomy 10:17-19**) played at this point. Our God, being compassionate, made specific laws that reflected this love toward people who found themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. God specifically gave laws aimed at the alien, the orphan, and the widow that required harvesters to deliberately leave the grain in the corners of their fields for those economically vulnerable classes to scavenge for themselves. In addition, the law disallowed the harvesters from going back to gather ears of grain they might have dropped in the midst of their harvesting (**Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19**).

However, keep in mind that we are dealing with what was probably one of, if not the most, spiritually and morally dark periods of the nation’s history.

² Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 652). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Aliens and specifically Moabites (who never had been granted favorable status in Israel), were an unwelcome bunch. Hence Ruth had every good reason not to count on the goodwill of the locals to let her glean, even though she qualified under Mosaic Law on two counts: she was a widow, and she was an alien who could not own property.

But this reminds us that God has always been looking outward to those who were not part of the normal group of believers. He has always had his eye on the hurting, the destitute, and the vulnerable, in order to come to the rescue of those who would humble themselves and seek His face in complete submission.

By Ruth's saying that she "may find favor" in the eyes of the locals, she seems to signify that she was aware of the possibility that the right to glean was frequently denied to the destitute. She would have to look upon the "**favor**" of the owners and managers of the fields if she hoped to be successful.

Naomi's affirmative response was short and to the point: "**Go ahead, my daughter.**" It appears that the tone of bitterness in her heart that was evident in **chapter one** had subsided.

Beginning with **verse 3**, the writer now goes into more chronological detail of Ruth's first day of gleaning in the fields outside of Bethlehem. He opens by making one of the key statements in the book. He says that Ruth "**happened to come to a portion of the field belonging to Boaz.**" The writer's point is that Ruth may be showing great initiative to seek a way to survive, but behind the scenes, the hand of a providential God was at work. Many may work hard, but not all succeed. Those who do succeed typically don't recognize that they didn't do it all by themselves. They may want to take complete credit for it, but they need to recognize that God is at work in their lives through their successes to draw them to Himself.

This was something I was glad to see in my late father's life. Some would say he was a very successful, hardworking businessman. He was, and early on he was proud of it. But fifteen years after he had reached the ranks of the successful, and before he was saved, he said something that gave me great hope that Jesus was drawing this proud man to Himself. While we were on a

walk at his ranch one morning, he looked out over what had become one of his prized possessions, and out of the blue said, “There are smarter men who have worked harder than I have and never made the money I did. I don’t know why the Good Lord did this for me.” Hearing him say that was the first sign I had recognized in twenty years of praying for my father that God might be drawing him to Himself. It gave me hope.

If God has moved in your life, shown you favor of any kind, I would caution you not to ignore it. Instead, begin with thanking Him. And if you haven’t entrusted your life to Him, you would be wise to follow the example of others, like Ruth and my father. Become a follower of Jesus.

As it concerns the providence of God and how His hand works behind the scenes, there is an Israelite proverb that explains it. We read in **Proverbs 16:33**, “**The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.**” Or, as the *New Living Paraphrase* puts it, “**We may throw the dice, but the LORD determines how they fall!**”

In **verses 4-13**, we have the details of the first contact between Boaz, our hero, and our heroine, Ruth.

⁴Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, “May the LORD be with you.” And they said to him, “May the LORD bless you.” ⁵Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, “Whose young woman is this?” ⁶The servant in charge of the reapers replied, “She is the young Moabite woman who returned with Naomi from the land of Moab. ⁷And she said, ‘Please let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves.’ Thus she came and has remained from the morning until now; she has been sitting in the house for a little while.”

Let's make sure we have a correct picture in our minds of this scene. I have watched several Hollywood renditions of this love story, and none of them got it right.

One male servant was the manager over the other male servants, who were hard at work harvesting the fields. It was probably early morning, because not until **verse 14** do we have a scene change when the workers stop for lunch. Hence, this scene took place shortly after the workers had begun their harvesting. They were not very far into the field, so those who wished to glean were waiting off to the side for the harvesters to have gone far enough for the gleaners to be given permission to start gleaning. Ruth was in a "**house**," a temporary shelter from the sun, waiting her turn with the other gleaners, when Boaz, the owner of the field, arrived to check on how things were going. It reminds me of what any good businessman does. You cannot expect good results from your employees without being there to inspect their work.

Notice in **verse 4** who blesses whom first. Boaz said, "**May the LORD be with you!**" From the outset we sense that Boaz has provided a positive work environment for his people. In this regard, he serves as a model of "hesed," God's true loving kindness for all who supervise others in their work. All of Boaz's speeches in this chapter are characterized by grace. With a boss like that, it is no wonder that Boaz's workers responded with a blessing of their own, "**May the LORD bless you!**"³

As he looked over to the sideline of the field at the waiting gleaners, he noticed someone whom he had never seen before. He identified her as "**the young woman**," which suggests she was considerably younger than he. It also raises expectations in the mind of the reader.⁴ By the manager's description of Ruth, "**the young Moabitess**," the reader realizes that news travels fast in a small town.

⁸Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go

³ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 655). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁴ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 655–656). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. ⁹Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw.”

Boaz’ address of Ruth as “**my daughter**” is remarkable not only because it is reminiscent of how Naomi perceived Ruth (1:11-12; 2:2), but it brings to mind the genuine sense of responsibility that Boaz felt for Ruth. Despite the fact that she was a Moabite, he offered his protection and his resources.⁵ For Ruth to be called “**daughter**” by this unknown foreigner must have stunned her. What a unique, unexpected greeting for this stranger to use.

The NASB’s translation of Boaz’s instruction to “**stay here**” is too weak a translation. This is the same verb used earlier in 1:14 describing Ruth’s “**clinging**” to Naomi. It is also the same verb used in Genesis 2:24, that a husband should cleave to his wife. Hence, the meaning is more than just, “Stay here.” It is, “Plant yourself in this field. Don’t go anywhere else. I want you to find your fill, your complete provision right here!”

Boaz’s command for his servants “**not to touch**” her was his instituting a non-harassment policy to the other servants in the field as well as the men and reapers to leave Ruth alone and to not treat her poorly.

Then, he just kept pouring on the compassion when he offered that she “**drink freely**” from the already gathered water meant for the servants. Typically, at the beginning of each day as the servants left town for the fields, they would stop to “**draw**” water from a well or cistern. Then they would carry the water down to the field and put it in larger containers for all of the workers. Following that, the normal customary procedure was that foreigners would draw out the water and give it to the Israelites, and women would draw water

⁵ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 659). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

for men. Boaz's authorization of Ruth to drink from water his men had drawn is indeed extraordinary.⁶

Ruth was blown away by this obvious, undeserved random act of kindness toward herself, an alien and destitute woman. Her immediate reaction is recorded in **verse 10**. **"The she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, 'Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?'"** Sure, she was pleased, but definitely she was confused.

Boaz quickly explained, ¹¹**"All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know."**

The reports that Boaz had heard about Ruth have emphasized two details: her extraordinary kindness to her mother-in-law, and her extraordinary courage in accompanying Naomi back home. Although destitute, this was a woman of noble character.

Furthermore, by his blessing of Ruth that follows, it is quite obvious that Boaz understood that Ruth had made a genuine conversion to Judaism. Because she had completely turned her back on the pagan gods of Moab, Boaz pronounced one of Scripture's most beautiful blessings anyone has spoken over another. **"May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge."**

Not only was Boaz gracious and compassionate, but he was quite humble. He took no credit for the compassionate provision he had provided. Instead, he pointed to Yahweh as the giver and protector of her life, the one she had committed her life to.

Understanding the commitment that Ruth had made to both Naomi and Yahweh, Boaz introduced one of the most beautiful pictures of divine care in

⁶ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 660). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

all of Scripture. He imagined Yahweh as a mother bird who offers her wings for the protection of her defenseless young. He spoke of Ruth's experience as **“coming to seek refuge/asylum under his wings.”**

In blessing her this way, Boaz recognized that God had put him in the position of personally functioning as the wings of God.⁷ His actions remind me of **Proverbs 14:31**, which says, **“Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors Him.”**

Ruth was stunned by what had just happened to her. She did not know who Boaz was. She had no knowledge of who owned the field. This first scene of her first day with Boaz closes with her overwhelmed, humble, and grateful response. Like a young chick frightened by the pouring rain and suddenly pulled in under a strange set of warm, secure, protective wings, she said, **“I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants.”**

In **verse 10**, Ruth's expression of amazement at Boaz's kindness was based on racial considerations; he had paid attention to her even though she was a foreigner. Here in **verse 13**, the issue was class. He had spoken kindly to her, his **“servant,”** even though she was not like his other **“servant girls.”**⁸ On the ladder of status, the lower rung was that of a servant. But the lowest rung would be reserved for an alien servant. Ruth viewed herself as occupying that lowest rung on the ladder. She was totally amazed that her race and class could not stifle Boaz's compassion toward her.⁹

Once again, there is a special term used three times in this first scene that highlights the unfolding real-life drama. It's found in **verses 2, 10, and 13**. All three times it is used by Ruth. In **verse 2**, Ruth asked Naomi for permission to go look for **“favor”** in the fields as a gleaner. That's why she

⁷ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 663–664). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁸ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, p. 665). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁹ Block, D. I. (1999). *Judges, Ruth* (Vol. 6, pp. 665–666). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

went to this random field to glean, to find “**favor**.” Then when “**favor**” is mentioned the second time, it is being bestowed upon Ruth, and she questions it. The third time “**favor**” is used, Ruth hesitantly embraced it, because it was too good to be true!

So what is behind this Hebrew term, “**favor**?” The Hebrew word is translated favor and grace in the NASB. In other English translations, words such as mercy, compassion, generosity, and kindness are used.

It depicts a heartfelt response of sympathy and compassion from one who is of a superior rank to one who is in need or of a lesser rank. At the same time, it also points to one who is so gracious herself, or so charming, that the superior notices it and can’t help but show compassion to the person.

In our drama, Ruth has the character of being charming or favored. Why? Because of the loving kindness she has shown her mother-in-law. She is a woman of outstanding character. Evidently, Boaz had learned of Ruth’s acts of loving kindness toward his relative Naomi, and when he met her, immediately judged her as charming. In turn, she “**found favor in his eyes**” so that he couldn’t help but honor this courageous woman of faith. Character does count!

On the other side of the equation, imagine what the “**favor**” of Boaz, this man of God, did for the relatively young in the faith, Ruth, a previously pagan Moabite! Boaz became the living example of hesed, the loving kindness of God in the flesh. Boaz is a type of Jesus, as we will see in our further study of this little book. And here we see the first sighting of the Jesus-type character of Boaz in the flesh. He showed favor, compassion, and kindness to Ruth.

In **Matthew 5:16**, Jesus speaks to His Kingdom citizens: “**Let your light shine before other, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**” As believers, we are called to be salt and light in a dark and tasteless world. Through our showing favor, random acts of kindness, to others in Jesus’ name, we open doors to bring the good news of the gospel into people’s lives. We encourage believers who are living in tough times and others who think God has forgotten them.

As we move through this Christmas season, let’s meet the spiritual needs of

people's hearts by first practicing random acts of kindness, for you never know what one act of random kindness, done in Jesus' name, will accomplish.