

SERIES: BOOK OF RUTH
“Witnesses“
Ruth 4: 9-11a

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and these witnesses, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy matrimony.” The “Dearly Beloved” wedding service comes from the Form of Solemnization of Matrimony from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, dating from 1662.

Something old is still something new. This traditional, old, 1662, opening of a wedding ceremony is still one of the most recognized and used statements regarding the gathering of witnesses to an event that we have. Today, however, I will take us millenniums further back than 1662 to another gathering of witnesses, and we will find that something old is still something very new.

Turn with me to Ruth 4. I want us to look at another repeated phrase that has caught my attention and thought. I want to relate it to us and specifically to our participating in the Lord’s Table today. READ RUTH 4:9-11a. The repeated phrase is “**You are witnesses today... you are witnesses today.**” **All the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, “We are witnesses.”**

I. The Meaning of Witness

The key word here is *witness*, as a noun, not a verb. The dictionary gives six statements about a

- wit•ness:** 1 an attestation of a fact or event : TESTIMONY
2 one that gives evidence *specif* : one who testifies in a cause or before a judicial tribunal
3 one asked to be present at a transaction so as to be able to testify to its having taken place
4 one who has personal knowledge of something
5 something serving as evidence or proof : SIGN
6 public affirmation by word or example¹

All six of these statements relate one way or another to what we read in Ruth 4 and what we are.

The very useful Bible study tool, *The Theological Wordbook of the OT* says, This word, *witness*, appears some sixty-seven times in the OT, is derived from the root *ʿ-ūd* meaning “return” or “repeat, do again.” The semantic development apparently is that a witness is one, who by reiteration emphatically affirms his testimony. The word is at home in the language of the court.

A witness is a person who has firsthand knowledge of an event or **one who can testify on the basis of a report which he has heard** (Lev 5:1 “**Now if a person sins after he hears a public adjuration to testify when he is a witness, whether he has seen or otherwise known, if he does not tell it, then he will bear his guilt.**” NASB95). Such a person is under obligation to testify (Prov 29:24). The law demanded the testimony of at least two witnesses to establish guilt (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15). In the case of a stoning, the witness hurled the first stone (Deut 17:7; cf. Acts 7:58).

The OT recognizes that a witness could be dependable or false....To designate the unreliable witness the word is qualified by other words such as *šeqer* “false” (Ex 20:16), by *kāzāb* “lie” (Prov 21:28), by *bēlī ʾya. al* “worthlessness” (Prov 19:28), by *šāw* “emptiness” (Deut 5:20 [H 17]), and by *ḥ ʾāmās* “violence” (Ex 23:1; Deut 19:16; Ps 35:11). Bearing false witness is prohibited in the Decalogue [10 Commandments] (Ex 20:16) and is condemned in the wisdom literature by at least seven proverbs (Prov 6:19; 14:5; 19:5, 9, 28; 21:28; 25:18... According to the law, a false witness is subject to the same penalty he hoped to have inflicted upon the accused (Deut 19:16–21). But on the positive side,

A witness was needed for various transactions such as the sale of property as seen in the Book of Jeremiah (Jer 32:10, 12, 25, 44) and the act of redemption which we see in Ruth 4. (Ruth 4:9, 10, 11).²

¹ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Eleventh Edition)

Boaz has just redeemed the property and persons associated with the house of Elimelek. He has stated the people are witnesses (def. 3) and they have agreed (def. 6).

In this simple action of calling the elders and people gathered at the court scene as *witnesses*, Boaz prefigures Jesus in calling His disciples, and ultimately us, to be His witnesses. As His witnesses we fulfill a vital role in the propagation of Christianity here and throughout the world.

II. The Making of a Witness

1. As a witness.... **We testify that something is true (def. 2)**, so that whenever something is disputed or brought into question, there is a source that can substantiate the validity of whatever is questioned. Boaz wanted witnesses so there could never be any question that he purchased all the rights to the property and people associated with the house of Elimelech. He had at least 10 elders, plus all the curious people who had gathered at the court that morning.

Jesus, on the night before He was betrayed, gathered a crowd of disciples and others around Him. Most of them observed the events of that night and the next day. There were more than enough *witnesses* to substantiate His death and burial. At least the last third of each of the NT Gospels covers that event. Each writer writes with the authenticity of an eye-witness. Likewise, Jesus' resurrection is *witnessed* by a variety of people at a variety of times, so there could be no mistake about it. Paul tells us that more than 500 people at one time saw Him. He commissioned these people to "go and tell" the world. Being an eye-witness to the resurrection of Jesus became the watchword in the proclamation of the apostles. Listen to some of their statements:

Jesus commissioned those who saw Him with these words: **"You are witnesses of these things."** (Luke 24:48, NASB95) These words are very close to the words Boaz used when he said, **"Today you are witnesses!"**¹¹ **Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses."** [This sounds close to "He is risen!" with the antiphonal response "He is risen, indeed!"]

A few weeks later Peter led the group in selecting a replacement for Judas by saying, **"beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection."** (Acts 1:22, NASB95) In the preaching that followed there was always a mention of the *witness factor*. Listen,

"This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses." (Acts 2:32, NASB95)

"You... asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses." (Acts 3:14-15, NASB95)

"And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." (Acts 5:32, NASB95) Did you hear what just happened? By the Holy Spirit indwelling each of us, we have been made "witnesses" also. Peter continued,

"We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. "God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead." (Acts 10:39-41, NASB95)

The disciples who actually saw the resurrection have a special status as witnesses, like the direct signatories to a will (e.g., Acts 1:22; 10:41; 22:15). But those who simply benefit from the work of Christ become witnesses *de facto*, because they are filled with the Spirit (Jn 15:26-27; Acts 5:32). Either way, such testimony may mean martyrdom: in the book of Revelation the Greek word for "witness," *martyrs*, is

²Harris, R. L., Harris, R. L., Archer, G. L., & Waltke, B. K. (1999, c1980). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (648). Chicago: Moody Press.

already taking on this further significance. The witnesses who testify to the saving death of Jesus may seal that testimony with their own death (e.g., Rev 6:9; 12:11; 17:6).³

Believers, that is us, are witnesses to the truth of Jesus because we testify to His cause on the basis of the report we have received from eye-witnesses. [Def. 2 and Lev. 5:1]

2. As a witness... **we speak truth and tell what is right** about Jesus. **"He who speaks truth tells what is right,** ... (Proverbs 12:17, NASB95) Boaz repeated the truth about what he had purchased. He said,
1. I have bought the land
 2. I have acquired Ruth as my wife
 3. You are my witnesses.

Likewise, when we read aloud the biblical accounts of Jesus and all that He did, or teach a lesson based on the Scriptures, or talk to someone about something in the life of Christ we are repeating the truth. Another proverb says **"A trustworthy witness will not lie..."** (Proverbs 14:5, NASB95) When we are attesting to the truth of the events of Scripture as we have received them [def. 1] and giving public affirmation by word [def. 6] we are being trustworthy witnesses.

3. As a witness... **we influence, impact, and save people.** Proverbs 14:25 says **"A truthful witness saves lives,..."** (NASB95) You understand that we don't do the saving, Jesus does that. But we are His agents that point and direct people to (or away) from Him. Being in partnership with Jesus in bringing people to faith is one of the most worthwhile, exciting, and eternal things you can be part of. By the fact of your faith in Jesus, you are one of His partners in the process. A truthful witness saves lives...there is nothing better than that.

4. As a witness... **we join with others to establish the facts.** Three times Moses wrote that **"...on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed."** (Deuteronomy 19:15 Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6) Four times this is repeated in the NT. Two verses after Jesus quoted Moses He added the famous phrase **"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."**⁴ Then the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering" and this is done in the assembling of ourselves together. When we gather together, such as every Sunday, we rehearse, refresh, remind, revisit, and rekindle the facts of our faith in Jesus. This is a witness to us and to all who observe our gathering. [def. 6]

This is also what participating in the Lord's Table is all about. As we gather and partake we do it in remembrance of Him who died for us, paid the price for us, and rose from the dead because His payment was sufficient to demise our debt. But this Table is a very powerful witness [def. 5] to what He has done for us. Our participation says we have first-hand experience with the forgiveness He gives [def. 4]. The Cross and the Eucharist are two of the main witnesses to Jesus that the world recognizes. Each time we celebrate the table we are being a witness to the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Having heard and believed the eye-witness accounts of the life of Jesus makes us witnesses. Through Boaz, I hear Jesus saying, "You are witnesses!" We can respond "We are witnesses, indeed!"

A man named David Watson wrote a concise little piece called

III. The Marks of a Witness

1. *A witness must have a first-hand experience of Christ.* Hearsay is not acceptable in a court of law, nor in the court of this world's opinion. People will listen only to what we have personally seen and heard.

³Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G. (2000, c1998). *Dictionary of biblical imagery* (electronic ed.) (958). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁴*The Holy Bible : New International Version.* 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.) (Mt 18:20). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

2. *A witness must be able to express himself verbally.* We may witness effectively through our lives, our work, our relationships, our attitudes, our suffering and even our death, yet we must still “be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you.” We must do so “with gentleness and respect,” and with the integrity of our lives demonstrating the truth of our words.
3. *A witness will have confidence in the power of God.* He relies on the power of the message of Christ and him crucified, and the power of the Holy Spirit. He knows that God can break through any defenses, and change any heart. This confidence will not be brash, but humble and sensitive, marked by much prayer. He knows that without God he can do nothing, but that with God all things are possible.
4. *A witness will have compassion for the spiritually lost.* He will care for them as individuals who matter deeply to God: made in his image, redeemed by his Son, and to be indwelt by his Spirit.

David Watson, *Called & Committed: World-Changing Discipleship*, (Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, IL; 1982), pp. 142-143

IV. The Measure of A Witness: You Wear His Coat Very Well

There is a magnificent story in Marie Chapian’s book *Of Whom the World Was Not Worthy*. The book told of the sufferings of the true church in Yugoslavia where so much wrong has been perpetrated by the politicized ecclesiastical hierarchy. That which has gone on in the name of Christ for the enriching and empowering of corrupt church officials has been a terrible affront to decency.

One day an evangelist by the name of Jakov arrived in a certain village. He commiserated with an elderly man named Cimmerman on the tragedies he had experienced and talked to him of the love of Christ. Cimmerman abruptly interrupted Jakov and told him that he wished to have nothing to do with Christianity. He reminded Jakov of the dreadful history of the church in his town, a history replete with plundering, exploiting, and indeed with killing innocent people. “My own nephew was killed by them,” he said and angrily rebuffed any effort on Jakov’s part to talk about Christ. “They wear those elaborate coats and caps and crosses,” he said, “signifying a heavenly commission, but their evil designs and lives I cannot ignore.”

Jakov, looking for an occasion to get Cimmerman to change his line of thinking, said, “Cimmerman, can I ask you a question? Suppose I were to steal your coat, put it on, and break into a bank. Suppose further that the police sighted me running in the distance but could not catch up with me. One clue, however, put them onto your track; they recognized your coat. What would you say to them if they came to your house and accused you of breaking into the bank?”

“I would deny it,” said Cimmerman.

““Ah, but we saw your coat,’ they would say,” retorted Jakov. This analogy quite annoyed Cimmerman, who ordered Jakov to leave his home.

Jakov continued to return to the village periodically just to befriend Cimmerman, encourage him, and share the love of Christ, with him. Finally one day Cimmerman asked, “How does one become a Christian?” and Jakov taught him the simple steps of repentance for sin and of trust in the work of Jesus Christ and gently pointed him to the Shepherd of his soul. Cimmerman bent his knee on the soil with his head bowed and surrendered his life to Christ. As he rose to his feet, wiping his tears, he embraced Jakov and said, “Thank you for being in my life.” And then he pointed to the heavens and whispered, “You wear His coat very well.”

Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God*, (Word Publ., Dallas: 1994), pp. 101-102⁵

Our faith in Jesus has made us His witnesses! We not only wear his coat, we wear His Name. Let us do it well! Amen.

“Today, you are witnesses” “We are witnesses, indeed!”

⁵Galaxie Software. (2002; 2002). *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*. Biblical Studies Press.