

“Out of the Mouth of God”
 Sermon on Ruth 1 for 5 Feb 2017
 Texts: various

It was Sinclair Ferguson’s book, Out of the Mouth of God, that drove me to re-read, rethink and recast Ruth. Ferguson provoked me with his claim that Ruth is all about the ***indispensability of the family*** (genetically, socially and theologically) **and the indispensability of the church as family**. “God’s purposes in our lives are interwoven with his work in the lives of others.” (Ferguson, p.137) So we know, Ferguson is not talking about 21st century American family life as a sociological concern! His usage is more biblical. He is talking about family as a means that God instituted, and uses to accomplish His purposes on earth for now and in eternity forever. God wants us “to believe in Jesus and to join His people in church.” So we note that baptism is a sign of repentance and a token of allegiance: my sins are forgiven and I belong to the family of God now! Sure, Ferguson, I knew that . . . now that you have pointed it out! Here’s a question for us to consider: If the word is **alive, and sharper than a two-edged sword**, what is it asking of us?

All my vacation reading (thank you very much for the release of time!) either dealt with apologetics, the trustworthiness of Scripture, or with how to read the Bible. Very bracing. I was already studying what to preach and how to preach it better! Coupled with my return to Oxford, a very stimulating and provocative experience, I came home re-invigorated and tired but eager to preach. I am still sorting it all out, integrating and reflecting on all the in-put. It was hard to believe that I had actually lived here five and a half years, decades ago! Then I heard Simon Possonby’s outstanding sermon, “Questions Jesus Asks Us.” Simon has also written God’s Funny Man. He is the pastor of theology at St. Aldates Church in Oxford. Here’s one question: “Have you not read the Scriptures?,” or “Have you read?,” This is the Same Jesus who said, “It is written . . . and, “You have heard from of old.” *All of which deal with the capacity of Scripture to address us, to engage us.* “Have you not read the Scriptures?” put us immediately on notice. It suggests that we should read Scripture, understand it and apply it in a terse, convicting sort of way. Convicting? Yes, because even if we have read the Scripture it is possible that we have not read it deeply enough, or ready it properly, or managed to grasp its Word to us. Let’s look at an example of what I mean.

Take the passage read to us this morning from Psalm 119. Let’s clear the kitchen table of our minds and make some space to work on it. Okay, let’s “hear” it again; but this time let us position ourselves hear it better. I will suggest that in order to hear it better, we need to remember that we, taken all together, we, as the people of God called and composed as one body, we are the audience. *An obvious and overlooked fact.* And further, we, taken as a whole, taken as the congregation of the saints, have *entered into a pulpit fellowship* around a Sunday Sermon, to be addressed by the Word of God. Two premises (that of us as the audience and that of pulpit fellowship) alter our reading go Psalm 119:9ff.

That means something like this, the passage is not addressed specifically to an individual—that is, to a young man struggling to keep his **way pure**. That is what it says on a literal level, but because the Word is addressed to us as its audience, we should take it corporately. *What is God asking of us? Saying to us?* Perhaps, God is primarily

speaking to the body addressing how we are integrally and instrumentally involved with each other's lives. That to individualize, personalize and privatize this Word *is to miss what the Bible is saying!* So, with our hearts prepared somewhat, focused on the actual transaction and real audience, let's hear it once more:

**9 How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.**

Ah, the first word is **How**, as in **How can a young man keep his way pure?** The question is not put to him though, but to us! How are we involved in helping a young man among us to keep his way pure? This is our problem, not merely his.

Next verse: **By guarding it according to your word.** What does **it** refer to here? Isn't the answer at least twofold. First, **his way** is to be **guarded**. So, we ask, how does one guard something, something valuable? With fences, alarms, flood lights, dogs and security cameras, and with armed sentries as well, one of whom must be a faithful watchman—and those sentries must be on the job, alert and aware at all times. These devices and personnel expose some real differences between scriptural protection of one another in the body and the situation of a lion guarding the bloody carcass of its recent prey! The lion *knows* that there are those around who would like to snatch its food away and devour it themselves because that is the best that they hyenas and jackals can do, not being as powerful, quick and lethal as the hunting lion.

Analogously, the **young man** in the body of Christ possesses something valuable (**his pure way**) which others would like to steal from him to satisfy their own needs, lusts and desires. Howsoever perverse and wicked those needs may be whether inside or outside the church itself. So, the body of Christ is charged to supply the security, the guards and protection that will enable the **young man to keep his way pure!** And the body whole, free from contamination. This work *is done together, achieved corporately not individually—there is power in the Word, and strength in the body life entailed.* The “corporate” focus keeps our eyes on this meaning of the Word addressed to us. What does the word ask of us? What is the question?

The next thing we “hear” is that a **wholeheartedness** is required on all our parts to obtain, maintain and sustain purity:

**10 With my whole heart I seek you;
let me not wander from your commandments!**

What happened to me when this Word spoken was **conviction**. I was convicted by that Word of both a certain degree of ignorance (as in “you're not paying attention”) and of my half-heartedness commitment to the body. *It is one thing to miss something, it is quite another to miss the whole point!* I see now that *not only the lad* in question must be “wholehearted” in keeping his **way pure** as I must be “in” as well. We all must be hedging him about and helping him along. If I neglected my left arm the way that I have neglected my Christian duty to others, it would weaken and atrophy *if not fall off!*

Still and again, I am not the only one who needs a wake-up call! Serving others strengthens us all, and strengthens the whole church **which is the point!** I cannot

rationalize, or deny my responsibility that the request **let me not wander** is the sole concern of the young man—his individual/isolated concern alone. *Wandering from the commandments of God is everyone's dilemma*—it is a perennial danger, a trap and a snare of all is it not? **Thus the Bible speaks to us both directly and corporately!** Inattention, lack of fervor, is an improvised explosive device (an IED) alongside the roadway of life, invented and placed by an enemy to inflict damage and harm—even loss of life if that were at all possible. Picturing this world as a war zone can be very helpful in preventing collateral damage. We are called to be attentive, on guard, alert.

Next: just what are we in danger of wandering from? **Your commandments** is the answer from the Word. Neglect and carelessness about God's commandments puts us *at risk*—not so immediately, or drastically as disobedience perhaps, but still at risk. Spiritual indifference (laziness, apathy and inattention) over time can yield the same result: **wandering resulting from carelessness, or poor focus.** From Roberson's hymn:

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Verse 4, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing"

Searing of the conscience, among other ills, comes with devaluing the divine **commandments**, seared by indifference. Seeing the God's commandments as merely suggestions for the good life, or as obsolete, outdated and old fashioned *moralism*, or even as *a matter indifferent* is another thing that the whole body, if it is paying attention, can warn us off. We can urge each other to be more thoughtful, to read the Word, to live carefully *so as to live near and for the Lord* for this is pleasing to Him. It pleases Him as well as being beneficial to the body at large. But we are also told that a **wholehearted** walk, a wholehearted involvement in congregational life by everyone, in the pulpit fellowship, attending the Sunday Sermon, *being church with fervency and with eagerness* makes all the difference in **keeping our ways pure.** Well, that's quite a lot to ingest. But it proves my point: the Word makes demands on us.

I have covered only two verses, vv. 9-10 of Psalm 119, by way of illustrating how to read the Word properly. Now we must turn, we must take what we have learned and apply it to our approach to Ruth. What questions does the text demand of us? There are a few: 1. Does God provide? And if the answer is "yes," does this mean that His provision can wear the face of destitution? Of abandonment? Of widowhood and loss and grief? Is divine provision immediately evident in our circumstances? And what if it is not? 2. Should one, for the sake of personal loyalty and commitment forsake one's home, family, the dependable and familiar—including the hope of husband, home family and children? Is protection and provision depend on these things or something else? What would that be? 3. What is the meaning, cause or significance of famine? First, if we consider the multiplicity of causes (the deprecations of human enemies such as the Midianites, or Sherman's army on his infamous march to the sea. What of natural

disasters of disease, blight and fire? Deuteronomy 28 teaches that famine can be a punishment, or a curse for disobedience—**making the heavens as bronze and the earth as iron.** (v.23) Does the punishment end, is the end dependent on repentance—does famine have it work to do and is it constrained by that? According to v. 24 **dust shall come down from heaven and cover you with destruction.** In verse 38, it is noted that even though farmers may carry **much seed** into the field they harvest fails and **they carry little out**—suggesting famine by crop failure, or by locusts . . . and then there are worms sent to consume your vineyards as gypsy moths invading to devour our forests. A condition known as olive drop can cause the olives to fail and thus deprive the people of their oil. And finally there is the violence of warfare whereby our children are either slain, or taken captive (made slaves and borne away). Urban warfare in our inner cities reminds us that famines are not invariably rural in nature and their occurrence feels punitive—something beyond the consequence of poverty may actually be at work. Perhaps we have failed in our call to be just, or merciful, or loving and as a result reap sorrow, lost and devastation. Standing by, fomenting disaster, excusing it as a necessary state in social evolution and economic liberation (as Marxist utopians maintain) can be read as judgments of God on human arrogance and humanistic pride.

Does God provide? Are we called sometimes to endure hardship and deprivation for some greater good, or cause? Can we write off the biblical doctrine of penal suffering—or do we permit ourselves to be broken and to seek relief, restoration and blessing for all? Those are just some of the questions Ruth raises. They are deep questions. We want to know what God would have us do as the church in this set of circumstances. For we know that some people face deprivation, some people suffer for their faith, and that some people appear to be faced with severe chastisement for their corporate sins, for their social experimentation. The historic response of the church is to see these conditions of extremity as opportunities to love God by serving others. Indeed we have a gospel of hope which expresses a holy confidence that change is coming and that a glorious future lies ahead. There would be no need for a gospel of hope unless there were conditions of desperation and despair into which we might speak that hope.

When the Lord began His ministry He read these words of Scripture to an amazed congregation:

16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. 17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,
18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”
20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he

began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The One who asks “**Have you not read the Scriptures?**” appears to be the One who read the Scriptures. Consider: **good news to the poor. . . liberty to the captives. . . recovery of sight to the blind . . . to free all who are oppressed. . .to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.** Sounds like the world of Naomi and Ruth, to me. Sounds like our world, too. Let’s continue to journey together through Ruth seeking some answers, and asking a few more questions together.

Amen