

Testimony and Suffering | Ariel & Matt

SPEAKER Ariel Cervinski & Matt Ryniker

DATE Sunday, April 23, 2023

PASSAGES Psalm 18; Job 1–2; Job 4–5; Job 11–19; Job 21; Job 28; Job 38–39; Job 42; Romans 12

MESSAGE Begins at 1:07:26 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The Book of Job removes every tidy explanation for suffering and pointedly declines to hand us a better one. What it leaves standing is a God who sees more than we suspect, who can absorb our anger without flinching, and who asks for loyalty rather than theories — and a church whose job, when someone is in the fire, is to weep rather than to explain.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Ariel stopped asking God “why is this happening to me” and started asking “what is the work that you have for me.” That shift was the sermon before the sermon.
- ◆ The karma argument — good things for good people, bad things for bad ones — is appealing precisely because it makes sense, and because when life is going well it flatters us.
- ◆ Job’s first chapter closes two doors on purpose: the narrator tells us Job was blameless, and that he did not sin in his response. Neither the suffering nor the reaction can be blamed.
- ◆ Job’s friends were right about a great many things in general and catastrophically wrong about this man in particular. Canned answers can be orthodox and still be foolishness.
- ◆ God never tells Job why. He takes “God has gone AWOL” and “God does not know” off the table, and stops there.
- ◆ God was not angry at Job for shouting his frustration heavenward. He was angry at the friends for their explanations.

- ◆ We chase the why because in every other part of life, finding the cause is the blueprint for the fix. What we actually want is not the answer but control.
- ◆ What remains is small and solid: fear God, stay loyal to him alone, and weep with those who weep.

► 1:07:26

“We’re going to do something I think difficult this morning,” Matt said, and he was not overselling it. Hope Chapel was carrying a great deal of grief that April — the worship leader had named it at the top of the service, and the songs had been chosen deliberately against it — and the message was built to engage the suffering of the body in tandem with someone who was inside it.

Ariel’s word to the church

► 1:09:36

Ariel Cerwinski has been part of Hope Chapel longer than Matt has. She and her husband Rich have two sons — Ben Ryan, now grown and serving in the Navy, and Nico, nearly out of high school. Word had gone to the church that her cancer treatment was ending because her body could no longer take it, and that she had moved to hospice care. She had felt prompted to write something for the congregation and no longer had the strength to deliver it, so Halla Tompkins, the church’s director of children’s ministries, read it for her, prefacing it carefully: these are Ariel’s words, not mine.

► 1:10:46

She wrote about the phone call a year earlier, telling Ben Ryan she had to go back on chemo. Both of them cried, several states apart. “It never gets easy to tell your children that you need to go back on chemo,” Ariel wrote — and then told her son that anger at God and doubt are normal human responses to a thing like this, that even great Christian leaders have doubted God and his goodness. Her prayer was not that her family would feel nothing. It was that they would not turn their backs on him because she had cancer.

► 1:12:40

The next morning Ben Ryan texted to ask how she was feeling and to say he was praying for her. It was the first time. Her mother had taught her that God answers every prayer in one of three ways — yes, no, and not yet — and Ariel said she had to prepare herself for the answer she did not want while still asking for healing.

► 1:13:16

“I turned from asking God why is this happening to me, to what is the work that you have for me,” she wrote. “Don’t let me miss the blessings you want me to be part of. Give me the words to comfort my family and always point them to you. I trust you God even when I don’t understand.” What Matt said he valued in it was that she wanted God glorified and had abandoned dwelling on the question why.

Psalm 18, stopped at verse 21

► 1:14:49

Earlier in the service [Psalm 18](#) had been read aloud, and Matt had asked the reader to stop at verse 21 — the point where David, in the middle of his distress, says he has kept the ways of the Lord and is not guilty of turning from his God. That is not how the religions surrounding Israel worked. Their instinct was karma: something bad happened, so the deity must be angry, so bring an offering and fix it. “Like a confused husband in an unhealthy marriage,” Matt said — when his wife is upset, I must have done something wrong, are we better now?

David does something different. He abandons the karma angle and pleads his case to the only one it matters to. Which raises the question the rest of the morning circled. “Karma makes sense,” Matt said. “That is its appeal.”

The book that takes the easy answers away

► 1:16:13

So he went to Job. The opening line tells us the man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. “This is not sarcasm,” Matt said. “This is an integral part of the story.” The narrator vouches for him before anything happens to him. Then his children are killed, his property destroyed, his body attacked, and he responds like this:

► 1:16:55

“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’”

JOB 1:20–21 ↗

Two doors close in one chapter. Job must have done something wrong — off the table. Job must have responded badly, which is why it kept getting worse — also off the table. Every conversation that follows has to proceed without them.

The comforters and their canned answers

► 1:18:37

Then three friends arrive — Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar — and sit with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights without saying a word, because they saw that his suffering was very great. Matt read them as serving two functions: a foil to Job, because they are outside the suffering looking in and entirely confident, and then the fools of the story, whose advice exists to be contrasted with God's wisdom.

► 1:19:52

“Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.”

JOB 4:7-8 ↗

► 1:21:10

Eliphaz has a problem: Job has a reputation for being upright, so the karma argument needs a workaround. He finds one by denigrating everybody — can mortal man be in the right before God? — and then offers his advice: “As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause.” Matt put it plainly: Job's children are dead, his property is gone, his skin is ruined, and his friend suggests he try praying about it. The rewards on offer read, he said, like a television infomercial — redeemed from famine, hidden from the lash of the tongue, unafraid of the beasts of the earth.

► 1:23:43

Zophar makes it worse so quietly you can miss it: God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves. This misery, in other words, is God holding back.

► 1:24:14

Job's replies get shorter and harder, and they start with a knife.

“No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you” — “if you didn't get that,” Matt said, “that was sarcasm again.” Then the charge that names the whole genre: all that religious gobbledygook coming his way is

whitewash with lies, “worthless physicians are you all — oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom.” The seven days of silence were the best thing they did. The talking is what ruined it.

► 1:24:59

Eliphaz comes back in chapter 15 and simply runs the loop again —

the wicked man writhes in pain all his days, dreadful sounds are in his ears, he wanders abroad for bread saying “v

“Here we go again with the karma,” Matt said. Job has heard it:

“I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all; shall windy words have an end?”

And still Bildad restates it, the light of the wicked is put out, until Job asks how long they intend to break him in pieces with words. Underneath it all, Matt said, is pride: “I’m doing well because I’m doing well.” That is the intoxicating part of the karma argument — when things go well, the credit is yours.

Job’s version of reality

► 1:27:36

Scripture does say God cuts down the wicked, and Matt did not dodge it. But Job — and Jeremiah, surveying the same thing — report what they can actually see:

“Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them.”

JOB 21:7–9 ↗

Your principles don’t match what I can see, Job is saying. Jeremiah agrees with him.

► 1:28:55

Which is why Job asks “where shall wisdom be found?” — sitting in the ashes, looking at three men who are certain they have it. “We need an approach to God better than what makes sense to me at any given moment,” Matt said. Then a younger man, Elihu, who has been waiting and is angry, steps up — and after rightly refusing to blame God, lands more or less where the others did: according to the work of a man he will repay him.

The voice out of the whirlwind

► 1:31:19

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.”

JOB 38:2-4 ↗

► 1:32:28

“Words without knowledge,” Matt said, is the religious gobbledygook — the standard canned answers you and I toss around. God does not explain the suffering. He takes two suspicions off the table instead. If you were tempted to think he had gone AWOL — have you entered into the springs of the sea, have the gates of death been revealed to you? If you were tempted to think he had not noticed, he knows when the mountain goats give birth and concerns himself with the feathers on an ostrich. “His knowledge is far more filled out than even we suspect.”

► 1:33:48

“My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has... my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly.”

JOB 42:7-8 ↗

Job threw a great deal of anger at the Lord. “He could take that — do you read the Psalms? He can take it.” God was not angry at the man in the ashes saying what was true about his own pain. He was angry at the men with the explanations.

What the book never does

► 1:34:57

Before saying what is missing, Matt said what is there. “God is above, God is different, and God sees and understands things that we don’t.” And the friends’ foolishness is not left to inference; the book stamps it three separate times — in the opening chapters, where God’s own verdict is that Job really was upright; in the substance of the speeches themselves; and again at the end, in case there was any doubt left.

► 1:35:33

What is never there is God telling Job why it happened. “That is part of the genius of the Book of Job,” Matt said. It clears out the religious nonsense and offers no explanation of why bad things happen to good people to replace it.

► 1:36:24

The empty space is itself the instruction. The book teaches us not to be religious fools in the face of suffering — “one of the main points of this book is, do not do that.” Do not offer theories of why this and why that. “He would much rather you just shout in his direction your pain than offer up ridiculous nonsense about why this happens and why that doesn’t happen.”

► 1:36:58

The New Testament does tell us true things about what suffering produces. The week before, Wes had read from 1 Peter 1, where trials prove the genuineness of faith. Elsewhere we read that it produces long-suffering. Elsewhere again, that God has real enemies — principalities, powers and forces that oppose him and his people. Every one of those is a byproduct or a backdrop, never a reason: why couldn’t he prove the genuineness of our faith some easier way, and why does he let the opposition stand? “In our scriptures there is really no encouragement whatsoever to delve deeply into why God lets this, why God lets that.”

The answers we still reach for

► 1:38:06

Then the uncomfortable inventory of the options we are usually handed. It happened because you sinned — people brought that one to Jesus: is that why the tower fell on those people? It happened because I forgot to pray the day of the accident, I skipped my quiet time that morning, I’m sure that was it — as if the universe revolved around us. “I am Atlas. My prayer life holds the world together and I slipped up that morning.” It happened because of coincidence — that one, he allowed, is fair. Because America is going down the tubes. Because I shared the gospel last Wednesday and this is the counterattack.

► 1:39:43

Why we cling to the question is not mysterious: everywhere else in life, finding out why something is happening is the blueprint for fixing it. Any auto mechanic will tell you so. “The solution and control is actually what we want,” Matt said. “We don’t really want the answer.” What he wanted, standing there, was for it to stop — I want to fix this. Hence the fixes. He mentioned a family whose long-standing belief was that a woman full of faith and upright in her deeds would have an easy childbirth, a reward from God — enough hands went up in the room, ten or so, to show it was not a rare idea — and followed it to its conclusion: so the women who died in childbirth were the worst of us? He named the

charismatic version too, amassing spiritual power to fence off tragedy, and the one he has had said to his face: if we had enough faith nobody would age or get sick or die. That one always has an exit. “Well, I prayed for you, bro. I don’t know what your problem is. You didn’t have the faith.”

► 1:41:34

He gave Rabbi Harold Kushner’s book a fair hearing and declined its bargain. Kushner argues God cannot be all-powerful, all-knowing and good at once — if he is powerful and knows and lets it happen he cannot be good — and settles on a God who knows and cares and simply cannot help you. He wishes he could. “I don’t want to be just like Job’s friends,” Matt said. He would rather agree with Ariel: there is so much we do not even know that we do not know. Move past why, glorify God with however much life remains, have your family honor him. And if you came, as he put it, looking for hope in a hopeless world, the comfort in the Christian message is not an explanation either — it is that in our suffering Christ joins us, giving us his pain and death, with the hope that we will be resurrected in his life.

Three things to hold instead

► 1:43:49

Drop the pursuit of why and you still need instruction on how to live, so he left three. Fear the Lord — the beginning of knowledge, which fools despise, exactly as the comforters did; they were impervious to any other way of thinking. Stay loyal to him alone — it is the Lord your God you shall fear and serve, and you shall not go after the gods of the peoples around you. And the third:

► 1:44:35

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

ROMANS 12:15 ↗

“I find it comforting that Paul didn’t write, explain at those who weep,” Matt said. When someone in the body suffers, we all suffer, and we weep with them. That is sensible Christian compassion, and it is the whole assignment.

► 1:45:17

Then back to Ariel one last time, because the three things are her three things: whatever happens to us or to the people we love, fear and trust God only, stay faithful to him — “and we don’t dwell on why, but we do dwell on him.” Take comfort, Matt added, in the fact that God was not angry with Job for sending his frustrations God’s way. “Who else are we going to go to anyway?”

Not Nice People Chapel

► 1:46:11

He closed with a line Steve had handed him: there is a reason this church is not called Nice People Chapel. Our hope is not wrapped up in a pleasant lifestyle. It is in the risen Lord whose return we are still longing for, coming back for his bride in the middle of all kinds of chaos and darkness. And even if we die before he comes back, we will stand before the King of kings and Lord of lords, gaze on his beauty, and watch him make righteousness and justice known — and the thirst for righteousness will be satisfied.

► 1:47:45

Then, having prayed, he came back to the microphone because he had skipped the thing he always does — close with a concrete act of obedience, rather than treating Christianity like a TED talk. Sit before the Lord and ask what you can obey him in this week. “Maybe it is dropping a pursuit of why. That could be an act of obedience.” Maybe it is dwelling before him and offering him your hurts and pains. Maybe it is going and being the comfort for somebody else.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Psalm 18:1–21
- Job 1:1
- Job 1:20–21
- Job 2:11–13
- Job 4:7–8
- Job 4:17
- Job 5:8
- Job 11:4–6
- Job 12:2
- Job 13:4–5
- Job 15:20–23
- Job 16:2–3
- Job 18:5
- Job 19:2–5
- Jeremiah 12:1
- Job 21:7–9
- Job 28:12
- Job 32:4–5
- Job 34:10–11
- Job 38:2–4
- Job 38:16–17
- Job 39:1
- Job 42:7–8
- 1 Peter 1:6–7
- Luke 13:1–5
- Proverbs 1:7
- Deuteronomy 6:13–14
- Romans 12:15

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Ariel traded “why is this happening to me” for “what is the work that you have for me.” What would it cost you to make that trade in the hardest thing you are carrying?
2. Where have you found the karma argument working on you — reading your own comfort as evidence that you are doing well?
3. Job’s friends sat silently with him for a week and only became fools when they opened their mouths. What makes silence so hard for us in someone else’s suffering?
4. God answers Job by telling him what he does not know, not why he is suffering. Does that land as comfort or as evasion for you, and why?
5. Matt asked everyone to name one act of obedience in light of this. What is yours this week — dropping the pursuit of why, bringing God your pain, or going to weep with someone?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Ariel Cerwinski has been a member of Hope Chapel longer than its current pastor, and had been fighting cancer for nearly six years when she wrote this word of encouragement for the congregation. She and her husband Rich have two sons, Ben Ryan, who serves in the Navy, and Nico. Too weak to deliver it herself, she asked that it be read aloud for her. **Matt Ryniker**, Hope Chapel’s pastor, preached the message alongside it; he teaches the church’s baptism classes and makes a habit of closing every sermon with a concrete act of obedience.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGWx6g0h50k&t=4046s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader’s aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.