

# Better Than Drivenness (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4:16)

**Big Idea:** Don't cope with life by trying to control it or get ahead of others. Instead, enjoy life and love and serve others.

I've got a very basic argument to make today. The argument is based on two propositions.

1. Life is hard.
2. We've got to find ways to cope.

Does anyone disagree with the first proposition? Life is hard. Moved, seconded, carried. We all know life is hard.

Does anybody disagree with proposition two? We've got to find ways to cope. All of us try to find ways to deal with the difficulties of life. The main issue that we face is how to cope with the troubles of life. It's a problem that we all need to answer, and today's text is going to help us.

Welcome to the third week of looking at Ecclesiastes. Let's do a 30-second review of what we've seen so far. In the first week, we saw that life is like a vapor. That's the life is hard part.

Last week we began the conversation about how to cope with the fact that life is hard. We looked at some tactics that we commonly try as a coping mechanism: learning, pleasure, and achievement. We found that they don't really work.

That's the 30-second review. This week we're going to add more detail to how we try to cope with life. There are a couple of pretty typical reactions to how we try to cope with how hard life is.

Let's look at them and see if there's a better way.

## **Approach One: Trying to Control Life**

One approach to coping with life is to try to control it. We try to mold it to our will. We try to control life.

Julia "Hurricane" Hawkins took up running when she was 100 years old. She quickly racked up three world records by 102. At 103-years-old, she won gold last year in both the 50 and 100 meter races. "I hope I'm inspiring them to be healthy and realize you can still be doing it at this kind of an age," she said. "Everyday when you're 103 is a miracle."

I admire Julia "Hurricane" Hawkins. She's not accepting the way life is. She's bending it to her will. We love that. We hear advice all the time like, "The only limits in our life are those we impose on ourselves" (Bob Proctor).

But then Ecclesiastes 3 comes along. Ecclesiastes 3 says that there are limits, and one form of limits is that you are, and always will be, in a season of life. There's a season for everything. Everything. The Preacher covers 14 areas of life in verses 1 to 8. He tries to cover every aspect of life to say that God is in charge of the time and we're not.

There's a time for everything, but we're not in control of most of it, as this year has reminded us. It all has its place, but so much of it is out of our control. You didn't choose the day you were born, and you won't choose the day you die. And so much of the in-between is completely out of your control.

"The created world has a rhythmic pattern built into it, so too our lives within this world experience their own regularities and cadences that ebb and flow with the rolling years" (David Gibson).

I know a couple who love to plan. They plan their vacations in Microsoft Excel in 15-minute increments. They plan everything. But life doesn't work like that. There are seasons that begin and end and overlap in your life. Although we have control over a lot of things in life, we don't get to decide when these seasons begin and end.

In verse 9, the Preacher concludes that the net gain from all of this is nothing. And the worst part about this is the reality that the day of your death is approaching, and you have no control over it. "For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 3:19)

So don't cope with life by trying to control it. We have less control than we think. We can't control our lives, but we can choose our response to the season that we're in. We have no right to presume that we have control over tomorrow.

The book of James reminds us:

...you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:14-15)

Make plans – but be humble enough to realize that God, not you, is in charge of your life. Don't respond to life being hard by thinking that you can control it.

In his book [Spiritual Rhythm](#) (affiliate link), Canadian pastor Mark Buchanan talks about a difficult time in his life.

I woke one morning barren of fruit, bereft of joy, short of daylight. I could not shake it off. I could not make a thing grow. I saw a counselor. I had people pray for me. I read books. I begged God. I faked it.

Nothing ended it.

And then God gave me insight: this was winter. It would end, in time, but not by my own doing. My responsibility was simply to know the season, and match my actions and inactions to it. It was to learn the slow hard discipline of waiting.

Let me ask you: What season are you in right now? I'm not trying to say that you shouldn't try to stay healthy or improve your life. I am saying that we're not in control of what season we're in. Our responsibility is to know the season, and match our actions to it. Learn your limits. Stop coping with the difficulty of life by fighting the seasons.

One way to cope with how hard life is is to try to control it. There's a second way we try to cope. Here it is:

## **Approach Two: Getting Ahead**

We try to beat the obstacles and get ahead of others. We try to cope with life by getting ahead.

Chapter 4 is about me: my plans, my career, my desire to get ahead. We try to cope with life by getting out of the season we're in. We also try to cope with life by getting ahead.

In chapter four he talks about the ways that we try to get ahead of our neighbors.

4:1-8 give us a picture of what this looks like:

- powerful people getting ahead while others are oppressed (4:1-2)
- work motivated by the desire to get ahead of other people (4:4)

- people who never stop working because they're never satisfied with what they have, even though it makes them unhappy (4:7-8)

We want to get ahead. We want to make our mark. But it's all motivated by *me*, by a desire to make something of *my* life. Work is good. In fact, God created us to work. There are all kinds of healthy reasons to work. When we work, we're actually working for God. But work can easily become something that's motivated by an unhealthy desire to get ahead, to prove ourselves, or to accumulate stuff that we don't even need.

James Houston says:

Busy-ness can also be an addictive drug ... Busyness acts to repress our inner fears and personal anxieties, as we scramble to achieve an enviable image to display to others. We become "outward" people, obsessed with how we appear, rather than "inward" people, reflecting on the meaning of our lives.

So let's review. Life is hard. We try to find ways to cope. Two very common ways to cope with life are to try to control life, and to try to get ahead. If you want to get really fancy, you can do both!

Those are the two ways we often try to cope with life. We try to seize control, and we try to get ahead. But we're *not* in control, and working to get ahead won't really satisfy us. There's got to be a better way.

# A Better Way

Ecclesiastes isn't afraid to confront us with the cold, hard truth. But it's also not shy about pointing us to a better way. These chapters teach us to not cope with life by trying to control it or get ahead of others.

## **First, instead of trying to control life, enjoy it.**

When you know that God's in control and you're not, you're free to simply start enjoying whatever season of life you're in. So Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 says:

I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

He says something similar in 4:6: "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind."

Life is full of good things and bad things. You can't control them. But you can enjoy the good things that God has given you. I heard something over Thanksgiving weekend that's stuck with me: choose what you've been given. Instead of longing for a life you don't have, enjoy the one you do have with all its challenges. Embrace life for what it is, not what you want it to be.

## **Second, instead of trying to get ahead of others, love and serve others.**

“For the Preacher, the value of life is not what you earn but whom you relate to” (Gibson). In 4:10-12 he says:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken

Instead of selfishness, isolation, and greed, we need community. We need to know and be known. We were designed to live in community, to support each other, to lift each other up with words of encouragement. We need each other. That’s what God means for us to be in this church, to be embedded in the kinds of relationships that will help to keep us going when life gets hard.

I love the honesty of Ecclesiastes. Life is temporary. Your normal approaches to finding happiness through learning, pleasure, and achievement won’t work. You can’t control life, nor does it make sense to try to get ahead of others.

But you can learn that you’re not God. And then you can learn to enjoy the gifts that he’s given you, including the gift of being loved by him through Jesus, which surpasses all other gifts. And he puts us in a church family, where we get to be loved by others too. And even though your life will still be hard, you can enjoy his good gifts

and love and be loved. And all of this for the believer will be a taste of his eternal provision for you of eternal life and his love.

Don't cope with life by trying to control it or get ahead of others. Instead, enjoy life and love and serve others.

Father, whatever season we're in, help us to learn that you are in control. Help us to find contentment in the life you've given us instead of the life we want. And help us to move away from isolation and getting ahead to love and community. And may we receive all of this knowing that you are our good Father who delights in giving us what we need. May we find in Jesus all that we need in this world that so often leaves us empty. In Jesus' name, Amen.