

When to panic and when to act (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13)

The authors of 2 Thessalonians saw a painful unraveling within the community, and they responded with urgency.

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Don't panic!

The author or authors of 2 Thessalonians urge their readers “not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed...to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.”

The tone of their urging suggests that members of the Christian community in Thessalonica were in fact “shaken and alarmed.” Though the letter gives no clear markers to identify the date of its writing or the particular nature of the hardships the community faced, its urgent tone points to a time of intense persecution weighing heavily on a conflicted community. In the face of persecution and worry, the authors urge Thessalonian Christians not to panic.

“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” This half-verse, along with the way the word [*ataktos*](#) (vs. 6, 7, 11) is often translated, can give the impression that laziness or inactivity—unwillingness to work—was the central problem in the church in Thessalonica. But that doesn't seem quite right to me. [Mariam Kamell points out](#) that *ataktos* is better translated as “disorderly”—or “idle and disruptive,” the phrase the NIV uses to convey the full meaning of the word. Those chided as “idle” in verse 11 of the passage are in the same breath called “busybodies.” It seems that inactivity alone wasn't precisely the problem in Thessalonica; the problem was

certain kinds of *activity*, behavior that was disruptive and destructive to a community that was already struggling with the trauma and stress of persecution. It wasn't just failing to work that was the problem, members withholding their effort and energy from the community's life and work. The problem was members expending their energy and giving effort to the wrong kind of "work" in the community.

In the midst of the crisis, some members fixated on the promise of Christ's return and broadcast throughout the community their anxious speculation about the coming of the day of the Lord. And then there were the busybodies and meddlers. We don't know exactly what they were doing, but we do get a picture of the impact of their "work": more anxiety, tension, and perhaps resentment spreading and sinking into the fabric of the community.

The authors of 2 Thessalonians saw a painful unraveling within the community, and they responded with urgency. Their letter weaves together stern warnings and positive encouragement for the church in Thessalonica. They cautioned church members to "let no one deceive you" (2:3), recognizing how fear and anxiety make us vulnerable to false promises and false prophets. They warned against the work of busybodies—teasing out other members' fears, spreading misinformation and worry, meddling, and undermining the community's mission.

But the writers also praised the community "because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for another is increasing" (1:3). And, through their prayers, they drew the community's attention to their mission as the body of Christ. They prayed, "may our Lord Jesus Christ...comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word," and "may the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ" (2:16; 3:5). The authors acknowledged the hardship the community in Thessalonica faced, and they urged members to reject the destructive work of busybodies and instead continue their work witnessing to God's love and mercy.

They were writing to a specific community facing the particular challenges of its time. But their warnings and encouragement to the church in Thessalonica ring true in our time. These days, reports on the acceleration of climate change and news of devastating fires give plenty of fodder for anxious speculation. Youth around the world organized a global climate strike to urge immediate, meaningful action in response to climate change. "I want you to panic," said Greta Thunberg to the World

Economic Forum earlier this year. “And then I want you to act.”

So often in scripture, God’s messengers in times of hardship and crisis show up and say something like this: *When things look dire, do not be afraid. Do not be led astray by false prophets. Now, here is what God is calling you to do. Get busy.* Thunberg’s words are different than these. But I hear in her voice an echo of God’s messengers in other times, a reminder that in times of crisis, in the face of hardship and suffering, our call is to face the reality of the hardship and to “not be weary in [doing] what is right.”

We are called to be mindful that our action is not fearful meddling, the idle, disorderly work of busybodies that destroys and diminishes. We are called to grounded and faithful action that is rooted in God’s power and will for the healing of our world.