

The Scandal of the Grace of God.

A biblical look at why, 2000 years after the first advent, our Lord Jesus Christ is still to reappear.

by Matt Perry, Executive Director, febc.nz



Have you ever wondered why, year after year, we're still here celebrating the first appearance of God among us, and waiting and waiting for Jesus' second coming?

Unless we have a sound understanding of why we're still waiting, it is quite possible to grow weary and disillusioned in these 'last days.' I will show you here that there is a 'scandalous' reason why Jesus hasn't yet returned, and that we have invigorating work to do in the waiting time. We can be encouraged and engaged as we wait, year after year, until he comes again. Read on :)

Are these the Last Days?

All my Christian life I've heard well-meaning people say "*Jesus is coming soon*" or "*This is it, these are the last days,*

Jesus will be back any day." The fact is well-meaning people have been saying this for millennia. Add a global pandemic into the equation along with government mandates and vaccine passports, and theories about being in the Last Days and the Apocalypse will mushroom!

Hebrews 1:2 tells us we are in the last days, and we have been for around 2000 years. Perhaps the real question people are asking is – *are we in the last of the last days?* Wherever we are on God's timeline, our ministry is the same. So, why are we still waiting.

Asking Jesus a challenging question.

If you have ever been anxious or confused by the delay of Jesus' return, then you're in good company.

His cousin *John the Baptist* was the last prophet sent to prepare the way for Messiah. He urged people to sort themselves out with God, and be baptised to demonstrate their allegiance to the Holy God, and to demonstrate how much they wanted to be cleaned-up and good.

But at one particularly low point in John's life he literally doubts the reality of the Christ! He's in prison for challenging the authorities of the land, and life and ministry are not going quite as he'd expected. Probably with great pain he sends a message to Jesus asking:

“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” Matthew 11:3

John's expectations come from a lifetime of scripture reading, prayer, and simple living. All this in order to focus on God's plans for humankind, and especially the arrival of the Saviour of the world. So just imagine his anguish when he has to ask such a question? **“should we expect someone else?”** In other words - Did I get it wrong?

John has not gone too far wrong, and his theology is fair and understandable. He loves the words of the prophet Joel, among others.

**“Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy hill.
Let all who live in the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming.
It is close at hand -
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness.
Like dawn spreading across the mountains
a large and mighty army comes,
such as never was in ancient times
nor ever will be in ages to come.
Before them fire devours,
behind them a flame blazes.”**

(Joel 2:1,3 Emphasis added)

John 'knows' that the Messiah is coming soon and that there will be a fiery outpouring. He also knows that the coming of the Messiah will be accompanied by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

**“I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.”**

(Joel 2:28 Emphasis added)

This is why John says *“I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”* (Matthew 3:11-12 Emphasis added)

Christian expectations and timing.

John has built his expectations on good biblical study. The coming of the LORD will be a time of great outpourings of the Holy Spirit and of fire. So why is he so confused about the times, and why does he ask Jesus such a challenging question **“should we expect someone else?”**

John is mixed up because he is expecting the great outpourings of the Holy Spirit and of fire to be at the same time. The Holy Spirit should be poured out on the faithful and righteous, right? And the fire should be poured out on the evil and unrighteous. John expects that Jesus will quickly 'gather' his faithful followers, and 'burn up' the wicked of the world and destroy all evil. After all, this is what the Word of God says, isn't it?

John's confusion is fair enough considering he has been a model believer all his life, but here he is in prison! He had called out King Herod for his deviant sin (Herod married his brother's wife), and instead of Jesus freeing John and 'burning up' Herod, Jesus is having meals with tax collectors and prostitutes, and Herod is having parties!

...should we expect someone else?”

Had John the Baptist completely misunderstood the Word of God? Not exactly. But he had misunderstood the timing of Jesus' work. John expects Jesus to pour out the Holy Spirit and fire all at once in a cataclysmic end-of-the-world event. But instead, Jesus ushers in the new Age of Grace, a season for humankind where Christ would remain present with us in the Holy Spirit revealing, saving, delivering, healing and liberating through his body on earth. Then eventually in God's good timing, Jesus will reappear and pour out the 'refining fire,' this time in judgement. Only the righteous will survive.



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Every linguistic people will eventually be represented in heaven. Revelation 7:9

So John was right about the outpourings but wrong about the timing. This is why Jesus' reply to John's challenging question is so important:

And Jesus answered them, *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. **And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.**”* (Matthew 11:4-6 ESV Emphasis added)

The real scandal of Jesus' delay.

Jesus describes the great works of healing and proclamation that are going on, and then tells John and the world not to be offended by his timing and his methods. The word for “offended” (ESV) and ‘stumble’ (NIV) is the Greek word ‘scandalizo.’ In other words:

“Try not to let it scandalise you that I am giving the world a long time to respond to me in faith!”

Many today are highly offended by Christian faith that believes in a gracious and merciful God, while evil and suffering continue to exist. How can Christians believe in Jesus Christ year after year, and yet the world is still languishing in pain and pandemics?!

Because God *“is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger*

and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.” (Joel 2:13 Emphasis added)

The time between Jesus' birth at the first Christmas and his reappearance at the second coming is the Age of Grace for the world, and the Age of Grace and Missions for the Church. We have a fantastic purpose in these waiting years. To go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). To go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation (Mark 16:15). To preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations (Luke 24:47).

This current age is the church's time to free the bound, to give sight to the blind, to release the oppressed. In other words liberate people in body, soul and spirit. (Isa. 61:1-2; Luke 4:16-21; Matthew 25:31-40; James 1:27 etc.)

This age is “the year of the Lord's favour” (Luke 4:19). Not a calendar year but a season of centuries when salvation in Christ can be broadcast and made known, and every human need is met in Jesus.

Wow. This gives us purpose. This gives us focus. This amazing Age of Grace by God gives us all time to turn to Him. But not just “us,” all peoples, all nations. This is why we're still here Christmas after Christmas. We're not just idly waiting for Jesus. We are actively making him known among all the peoples of the earth. This is our mission.



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So, how much longer will we wait for Jesus?

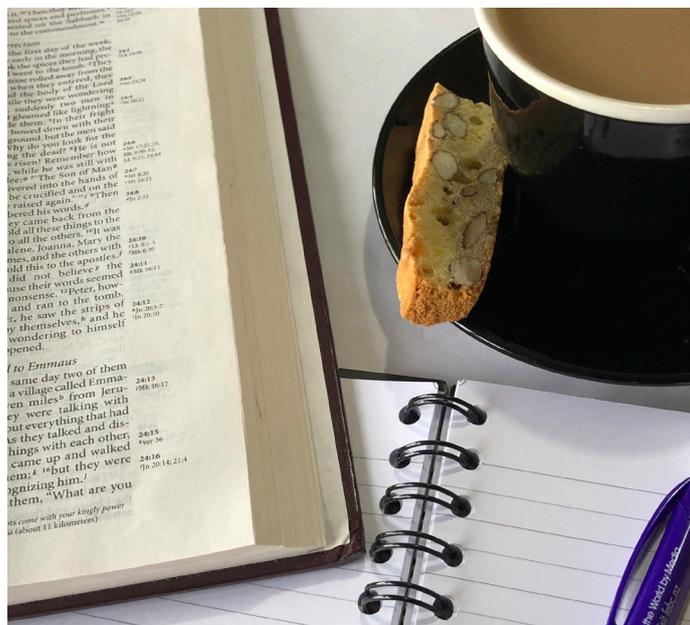
As long as it takes for all the nations (ethnic peoples) to have opportunity to experience the scandalous love of God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we the church have wonderful work to do. Are you on-board with the Mission of God?

This year I encourage you to step up your involvement in God's mission, praying, giving, and engaging where possible. Churches and organisations all over New Zealand are doing amazing work in all sorts of areas of life:

- **Liberating people from pain and suffering, poverty, addiction and enslavement.**
- **Announcing the love and promises of God with outreach and discipleship programmes of all sorts.**

If you have ever felt disappointed in the direction of the church, or confusion over your purpose in the world as a follower of Christ, I invite you to return to the scriptures below and refresh your vision for this age we live in. Remember, nothing but NOTHING can thwart the purposes of God, nor separate us from his scandalous love!

The scandal of the grace of God is why we're still here today! It is shocking that God, in his great love and patience, is giving humankind years to hear, to revere, to come to our senses and turn to Jesus, and worship him as he deserves. This is the ministry of the body of Christ in this age. Let's give it everything!



“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” - 2 Timothy 2:15

Reading and reflection

Read the following scriptures in your own time. Pause. Pray for fresh understanding and imagination, and consider the questions below:

1. **Psalm 67**
 2. **Isaiah 65:17-25**
 3. **Joel 2**
 4. **Matthew 24:1-14; 25:31-46; 28:16-20**
 5. **Luke 4:14-30**
 6. **James 1 & 2.**
- A. **What character of God is revealed here?**
 - B. **What purpose of God's Kingdom is evident here?**
 - C. **What is good news in this text?**
 - D. **Who or what is being liberated, and from what?**
 - E. **What work is he calling us to be involved in?**
 - F. **Where is this being done today, that I may be involved?**

FEBC broadcasts the good news in over 140 languages across Asia and Africa. We believe that all peoples deserve opportunity to hear that there is a good and beautiful life for them with God. We covet your prayers and support to ensure that millions of listeners are reached this year, and many lives in this troubled world are liberated and transformed by the God of Peace.

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:14)



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This article is edited and reprinted from Matt's blog post of December 2021. For more visit mattsmissionblog.com