

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

Israel’s Future - and Yours

Study #18

(Romans 11:1-36)

Introduction: Predicting the future...

Predicting the future is risky business, and reliable prophets are hard to find. For evidence, consider the following predictions of what would be true by the end of 2012, offered by some experts in their fields at the beginning of 2012.

- Mitt Romney in a landslide (various)
- Russian President Vladimir Putin will be out of power (?)
- Greece’s economic woes are over (German Chancellor Angela Merkel)
- The London Olympics will be a disaster (Der Spiegel magazine)
- The Communist Party of China will crash.
- The world will end (Mayans, although, not really)

False prophets are a dime a dozen.

Then we open our Bibles and find a track record of 100% accuracy in its predictions.

Scripture foretells Noah’s great flood, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the downfall of Nineveh, Babylon, and Tyre. It predicts Jesus’ virgin birth and His resurrection from the dead and much, much more! When the Bible speaks to what has yet to happen, it speaks with the authority of an Author who knows.

So, when we turn to Romans 11 and hear the Apostle Paul address himself to the future of the nation of Israel, we sit up and listen.

Following this morning, the next time we look into Romans we will be turning to chapter twelve.¹ That will be in March, because in February we will be focusing on one of our church’s Core Values as Pastor Jeff and I will highlight truths from the Bible that we hope will help you Build Faith at Home.

Today, though, we wrap up a three chapter parenthesis in Romans in which Paul has been dealing with the question, “*What about the Jews?*”

Through our look into the Bible this morning we’ll gain insight into the plan of God for the Jews’ future.

That’s right. While I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet (Amos 7:14), I am dealing with a prophetic portion of Scripture. Not only are we asking, “*Why have the Jews not embraced the Christian Gospel?*” but also, “*What does God have in store for the Jews?*”

Right off the bat Paul deals with a charge that some may have been making in his day.

The charge is that God has abandoned the Jews, that He has no plans for Israel, that there is no future for the nation that was once His chosen people. Paul is offended by that charge!

God HAS NOT Rejected His People! (vv. 1-10)

God is Still Saving Jews - He Saved Paul! (vv. 1-2a)

The issue - the trustworthiness of God (v. 1a)

[1a] I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be!

A rejected Israel would mean that God has broken all kinds of promises. And what kind of a world would we have if God broke His promises?

¹ Romans, chapters 1-11 is clearly a more doctrinal section where Paul lays the foundation of truth on which our lives are to be based. Chapters 12-16 will explore the practical implications of the truth of the Gospel as it is worked out in our lives.

When you or I break promises, we do terrible damage. But if God can't be trusted to keep His word, then we can't trust the cycles of nature, the laws of physics, or His presence with us.

God has NOT rejected His people, the Jews. And to prove his point the Apostle Paul presents Exhibit A: The Apostle Paul!

Case study - Paul! (vv. 1b-2a)

[1b] For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. [2a] God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.

Paul serves as quite an exhibit! He became a Christian against all odds, even against all logic. Jesus burst into his life WHILE he was hassling and arresting and killing Christians.

The Lord stopped him cold on the road to Damascus in a dramatic encounter and a blinding light and a voice from heaven. He convinced him that He, Jesus, was indeed the long-anticipated Jewish Messiah.

Paul's conversion and the conversion of other Jews proves that God has not rejected His people.²

God is trustworthy! He could not have cast the Jews off and still be a righteous and holy and just God.

At the same time, it is perfectly obvious that Israel is not presently enjoying its status as God's most favored nation in the world in 2013, nor was it in Paul's day.

So, what about Israel? To explain what God is doing with Israel, Paul reaches back into Old Testament history and dredges up a story involving the prophet Elijah.

² There is more going on than that Paul, the persecutor, was saved. The main thought is that if God were casting off the Jews as His chosen people, He would not have chosen a Jew to be His ambassador to the Gentiles, which Paul was. In Paul, the real point of the Jewish nation was finally being realized. They were being a light to the nations, and the bearer of good news to the world. This is more important than the simple fact that God has chosen to save one particular Jew. God is seeing to it that Israel fulfills its age-old mandate to be a light to the Gentiles.

God and the "Remnant Principle" (vv. 2b-6)

A remnant in the days of Elijah (vv. 2b-4)

Elijah lived in tough times. He was a prophet to the northern Kingdom (which was always apostate) and lived during the reign of an exceedingly wicked king named Ahab.

Listen to Elijah's lament.

[2b] Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? [3] "LORD, THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE."

Elijah looked around him and concluded that he was the only loyal follower of the one true God left in the whole nation. (1 Kings 19:10-14) Given the conditions in Israel at the time, it was an understandable thought. But Elijah was wrong.

[4] But what is the divine response to him? "I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL."

The Elijah story tells us two things. One, it affirms that the nation was in rebellion against God. Two, it affirms God's commitment to preserve a righteous "remnant" for Himself.

As it was in the days of Elijah, so it has always been.

A remnant today (vv. 5-6)

[5] In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. [6] But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

This is what we'll call the "remnant principle." It is the way God has always worked with the Jews.

The nation of Israel had never been completely faithful to God. At no point has EVERY Jew believed.

But God has always been graciously committed to saving some Jews who would carry on His work.

Just as in the days of Elijah, so in Paul's day, and so today there is a "remnant" of Jews who are being saved.

And, in Elijah's day and in Paul's day and today, the remnant is saved by God's grace. The remnant is never saved by its own merit.

Because the remnant is preserved according to God's choice and God's grace and NOT on the basis of works (remember Paul's own salvation!), the presence of a remnant is an obvious pledge of God's continuing interest in the nation as a whole.

But, again, the chosen nation chronically rejected God's gracious offers of salvation. And this brings us to a very sobering thought.

The Sobering Reality of Hardening (vv. 7-10)

[7] What then? That which Israel is seeking, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; [8] just as it is written,

"GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR, EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT, DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY."

[9] And David says,

"LET THEIR TABLE BECOME A SNARE AND A TRAP, AND A STUMBLING BLOCK AND A RETRIBUTION TO THEM."

[10] "LET THEIR EYES BE DARKENED TO SEE NOT, AND BEND THEIR BACKS FOREVER."³

³ Verse 10 could be talking about being bowed down under oppressive slavery, being bent under a heavy burden, cowering with fear, being bowed down by grief, being too weak to stand upright, or stooping to grope on the ground because one's sight is bad or one is blind. In the quote from Psalm 69, David was speaking of his own persecutors, but when applied Messianically, these are natural references to the opponents of Jesus. This Psalm was frequently used in the early church as a testimony to the sufferings of Christ.

Israel was pursuing salvation by way of obeying the Law of Moses (see Romans 9:31) - and as we have seen over and over and over and over again in Romans, salvation never comes by law!

Here's the thing, though. In spite of His people pursuing a means to salvation which He had never sanctioned, and despite the nation's hard hearts, stiff necks, clenched fists, and closed minds - God *still* graciously showed His mercy to some of those who rebelled and saved them.

The rest? Well, they were ***"hardened."***

The word we translate *hardened* was used among the ancient Greeks to refer to calluses that build up on the body.

Calluses, of course, are the hardened layers of skin on the farmer's or the mechanic's hands that protect him as he handles rough machinery. They make his hands tough and resistant to damage.

Calluses on the hands, or on the feet of a long-distance runner are helpful. But Paul wants us to know that just as a callous can grow on hands and feet, so a callous can grow on the heart.

The ***"hardening"*** here speaks of a spiritual callus, an insensitivity, a coldness to God and to the things of God.

There are people who are hardened against God who are graciously drawn by the Spirit to turn to Jesus.

And then there are others whom God ***"gives over"*** (Romans 1) to continue in the direction they were already heading. He hardens them *in* their rebellion. (He does not make them rebels.)

Paul quotes Moses and Isaiah here to let us know say that God hardened the Jews in Old Testament times. He is still doing the same thing today.

But, hardening the rebellious and saving a Jewish remnant is not all God is doing at the present time - NOT AT ALL!

Throughout history God has worked through the “*remnant principle*.” And throughout the history of the last two thousand years, God has also acted “parenthetically” to the great benefit of people like you and me - the Gentiles.

God HAS Inserted a “Gentile Parenthesis” (vv. 11-24)

God: Blessing the World through Israel! (vv. 11-15)

Good to the World through Israel’s rejection (vv. 11, 12 15)

Again, God has always been good to the nation that came from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

He chose them when there was nothing to commend them. He gave them a land (Canaan), delivered them from Egypt, and provided manna for them in the wilderness. He gave them victory over their enemies, provided them with a temple, and gave them Kings.⁴

But, in addition to His determination to do good TO Israel it has always been God’s plan to accomplish great good THROUGH Israel.

It has always been God’s plan to work mightily among non-Jewish people by using the Jewish people. That has been happening since the first century, but not exactly in the way we might have thought.

Provoking the Jews to faith in Christ by jealousy (vv. 13-14)

[11] I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles...

How so?

Well, for one thing, the Jews’ rejection of Jesus led to the crucifixion, which opened the door to the Gospel going to the Gentile world.

⁴ While God paved the way for them to receive His blessings, the bulk of the Jews have stumbled over the chief blessing, the “cornerstone” - the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we read in Acts that in city after city, the Jewish community refused to accept the Gospel, which prompted the Christian missionaries to turn from them and to present the message directly to the Gentiles.

So, we can say that the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews was what brought the Gospel to us.

Certainly, this was NOT the intended meaning of God’s words to Abraham in Genesis 12, “***In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed***” and “***So you shall be a blessing***”!

But this IS what has happened. Paul says it out loud and even MAGNIFIES his own personal ministry to the Gentiles. Why? Why make even more of the fact that he’s reaching Gentiles for God?

It is to provoke his fellow Jews to jealousy that they might turn to Jesus and be saved!

[13] But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, [14] if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

His hope was that when his fellow Jews saw others receiving the mercy and the goodness of THEIR God, they would begin to understand what they were missing and would desire the salvation they had rejected.

Paul was content to agitate some, anger some, challenge some, and make some uncomfortable, if by his Gentile-focused ministry he might move some to place their faith in Christ.

From Paul’s day to our own, the unbelief of the majority of Israel means that we Gentiles are greatly enriched. We have taken center stage in the forward march of the Gospel. Over the past two thousand years the Gentile world has been Christianity’s most recognizable face.

But, the world will be much more wonderfully enriched when the greater bulk of Israel is brought into the fold of the Christian faith.

Listen as Paul envisions for us how wonderful it will be when Israel turns to Jesus.

[12] Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!...[15] For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

In the meantime, God is working a marvelous thing in history to benefit us non-Jews. We, who in ages past have never had the opportunity to be vitally involved in God's work, now have that opportunity.

And Paul explains how - praise the Lord! - by using a gardening illustration!

God: The Master-Gardener (vv. 16-24)

Source determines nature (v. 16)

[16] If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too.⁵

The basic thought here is that source determines nature. If the root is holy, then so are the branches. For our purposes, that means that if Abraham and the patriarchs are holy (and they are), then so are those who are connected to them by faith (us!).

Having established that basic principle, Paul now explains, by means of the horticultural practice of *grafting*, how God is presently dealing with Jews and Gentiles.

First, a brief description of a normal grafting procedure.

God's gracious (and unusual) grafting (v. 17)

In grafting, a horticulturist cuts old branches away from the trunk of a wild olive (or any other kind of tree). He cuts the branches above the graft to let in light and air to the graft.

⁵ Numerous attempts have been made to equate the ***"first piece of dough"*** and the ***"lump"*** of verse 16, and the ***"root"*** of verse 17. Cranfield and Bruce say that the first part of the lump is probably referring to the first Jewish Christians. Johnson takes the first part of the lump to refer to the Jewish patriarchs. The root is probably a reference to the patriarchs. (so Johnson, Bruce, Cranfield)

Then, he grafts a cultivated branch onto the trunk of the wild tree. In this way the cultivated branch benefits from the vigorous root system of the tree in the ground and the grafted branch produces the better fruit of the cultivated tree (cultivar).

But the grafting Paul describes here is backwards from the norm. He speaks of a grafting where the wild is grafted on to the cultivated.

[17] But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree⁶

Now some people have accused Paul, the city slicker, of not knowing the first thing about horticulture and giving an inaccurate picture of grafting.

Nonsense! Paul knew perfectly well how grafting was usually done. He tells his story the way he does for a reason.

The cultivated olive tree represents Israel, and the wild olive branches represent the Gentiles. We, the Gentiles, in becoming part of God's family, have been grafted onto the rich cultivar of Israel.

And Paul has a message for us "wild olives."

Grafting in the Gentiles (vv. 18-22)

Humility required from the grafts (v. 18)

[18] do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.⁷

⁶ Paul used the olive tree because of its use in the Old Testament as a figure of Israel. The nation was compared to the olive tree because of the olive's ability to produce fruit in regions where no other tree could even live. God's passion was that Israel would bear fruit for Him as no other nation could or would.

⁷ *"Though we boast of rank, we must admit that we are but of pagan stock while the Jews are of the blood of Christ...The Glory came from them, not from us."* - Martin Luther

We wonder if Paul was afraid that Gentile Christians would be tempted to look down on Jews - for rejecting Christ or for persecuting Christians (as he himself had done!), or perhaps for other reasons.

Maybe. And if so, he told them (us!) to not look down their noses at the root (the Jews), because the root supports the branches (the Gentiles) - and not the other way around.

Let's make sure that we "get" this. You and I derive our spiritual blessing by virtue of being incorporated into the stock of Israel.

We partake of some of the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. We benefit directly from Jesus, the descendant of David. We enjoy some of the first-fruits of the New Covenant.

We are not the "big dog." We are the tail that is wagged by the big dog, Israel. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, *[John 4:22] "Salvation is from the Jews."*

Still, a self-congratulating Gentile Christian might read all of this, and think to himself, *[19] "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in."*

Here's Paul's response to that thought.

Fear required from the grafts (vv. 20-21)

[20] Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; [21] for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you.

Remember, the Jews weren't cut off because of *our righteousness*. They were cut off because of *their faithlessness*. (The issue - here as always - is faith, not human merit!)

And if pride leads us, the Gentile church (the new graft), to forget our reliance on God's grace, and if we exchange faith in God for self-confidence, we - as a group - will suffer the same fate as the old branches. We too will be cut off.

We are not to fear the loss of salvation, personally. How could we think that after having walked through chapter 8?! But, there is a place for a healthy fear of slipping into a mentality that glorifies works and law and obligation.

Nothing will more surely guarantee that God will cut off future Gospel opportunities to any group than if the individuals who make up that group (branch) abandon the way of faith and forget the primacy of grace.

And to ensure that we stay on the path of faith and grace, Paul urges us to consider something.

Gratitude required from the grafts (v. 22)

[22] Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

The Jewish nation had been on the receiving end of the kindness of God. Then, when they disbelieved, He dealt with them severely.

If we turn from the simple, grace-oriented, faith-based Gospel of Jesus, we won't continue to receive, as a group, goodness from God, either.

That would be true for a denomination such as the Evangelical Free Church of America. That would be true for a local church like Northwest.

The key to standing firm and healthy is to affirm with loudest voice the centrality of faith, not works, and grace, not Law.

Is that severe? Absolutely. The warning Paul issues is a sobering warning, indeed. It explains what happened to the Jews as much as it is a warning to us.

But, even though the Jews have been removed from the source of blessing, the game is not over for them. Not by a long shot.

Re-grafting in the Jews (vv. 23-24)

[23] And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again.

[24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?]

This can't happen in the natural world. If old branches that have been cut away from an olive tree, and tossed aside into a brush pile were grafted on to the parent tree once more and began to produce fruit, that would be a Grade A miracle.

Equally, to re-establish the Jewish people as the people of God when their unbelief is replaced by faith would be a parting-of-the-Red-Sea miracle in the spiritual realm.

And this is exactly the miracle God is going to perform!

God WILL Show Mercy to Israel - and by Israel to All (vv. 25-32)

A Partial and Temporary Hardening of Israel (vv. 25-29)

God does have a plan for Israel! (vv. 25-27)

*[25] For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery - so that you will not be wise in your own estimation - that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; [26] and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written,⁸ **“THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.”** [27] **“THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”***

The partial “hardening” that Israel has experienced, and that has been in place for two thousand years is not going to last forever.

God has **“given them over”** to their natural bent, and has not shown mercy to them as He had been doing in Old Testament days. But, there is an end in sight to this partial hardening.

⁸ There is Old Testament testimony to the eventual salvation of Israel from Isaiah 27:9 and 59:20-21.

And the hardening will remain in effect on Israel **“until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”**

Then, when the Gentile harvest is complete, **“all Israel will be saved”** - not just a mere remnant.

Talk about revival. This will be the revival to end all revivals!⁹

Until then? Until then God still loves the Jews. We still reach out to Jews. Some Jews will come to faith. Many Jews will not.

Israel, until then, and after (vv. 28-29)

[28] From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; [29] for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.¹⁰

What God promised He would do in Genesis 12 (Abrahamic Covenant) and 2 Samuel (Davidic Covenant) and Jeremiah 31 (New Covenant) - He will surely do.

He will one day fulfill completely every promise made to the Jewish people.

And the ground of Paul's confidence that the Jews are still beloved of God is not the essential *goodness* of the Jews. It is the essential, rock solid *faithfulness* of God.

This is what, in the end, it all comes down to. God - His loving and kind, compassionate and gracious, merciful ways.

⁹ Some people believe that this revival has, in fact, already begun, and that we are seeing the first fruits of God's outpouring of mercy on Israel. Worldwide, missions agencies dedicated to reaching Jews are reporting unprecedented numbers of Jewish people professing faith in Jesus as their Messiah.

¹⁰ In Paul's day, factions of the Jews were the most violent persecutors of the Christian faith. They had set themselves as the enemies of the church. But, the nation of Israel and the people who make up the nation are still deeply loved by God. God's love for them has nothing to do with what the fathers did. God loves Israel both because He loves Israel, and because He has chosen to love Israel. ☺ And some day, God will again lavish His blessings on Israel!

The Inevitable, Eventual Mercy of God (vv. 30-32)

*[30] For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, [31] so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. [32] For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.*¹¹

Here at the end, Paul lays it all out, neat and orderly.

God has justly determined that we should face the full and terrible consequences for our sin. All of us are so hopelessly *stuck* in rebellion that unless we are shown mercy by God, we are *stuck* forever.

That is why the New Testament can refer to us, outside of Christ, as being *“without hope”* and *“without God”* and *“dead in trespasses and sins.”*

The Gospel of Jesus says that mercy is available for hopeless sinners. The Gospel says that the end of God’s ways is mercy, pure and sure.¹²

The idea is not that all people will be saved and will receive the full extent of God’s mercy. He is teaching that God’s mercy is extended to all people without discrimination.

ALL who confess with their mouths *“Christ is Lord”* and all who believe in their heart that God raised Him from the dead receive the amazing grace of God!

Conclusion:

In each and every age, God has shown His mercy. From His one command in the Garden of Eden to the hundreds given on Mount Sinai, we have seen His justice.

And from Adam and Eve’s God-sewn animal skin garments to the sacrificial system under Moses, we have seen God’s super-bountiful mercy.

And, in every age, the means by which a person received that mercy was by faith in God’s promise.

What a plan! It justifies sinners while never compromising God’s righteousness.

It is a plan no person could have ever thought up. Nor is it a plan that anyone would have proposed if they had thought it up!

He sent His Son from Heaven to earth so that He might become like one of us, except for sin. He allowed Jesus to be led like a lamb to slaughter for us. And now He declares *“SAVED!”* anyone who trusts in Him.

No wonder Paul ends with a song of praise to God!

[33] Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! [34] “FOR WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? [35] OR WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN?” [36] For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

¹¹ This one verse summarizes chapters 9-11, if not all of chapters 1-11!

¹² Romans 11:32 echoes the thought of 2 Peter 3:9, *“The Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*

Appendix: THE CALLING OF GOD - THE STORY OF C.S. LEWIS

***I include the story of the conversion of C.S. Lewis, not because it is normative and that everyone who comes to faith in Christ has to have such a dramatic experience, but to show that God does work conviction at times in remarkable ways. Listening to Lewis tell his own story through letters reminds us of the impact God's Spirit can make on a soul.

(From Walter Hooper's "Collected Letters")

Lewis' letters about God illustrate his movement from being a pompous, sophisticated, religious know-it-all to a broken, humbled, spiritual seeker.

For example, in an early letter to Greeves (evidently Greeves was a close personal and lifelong friend of Lewis) the eighteen-year old Lewis writes: *You ask me my religious views: you know, I think, that I believe in no religion. There's absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best. All religions, that is, all mythologies (to give them their proper name), are merely man's own invention—Christ as much as Loki... Often, too, great men were regarded as gods after their death—such as Heracles or Odin: thus after the death of a Hebrew philosopher Yeshua (whose name we have corrupted into Jesus) he became regarded as a god, a cult sprang up, which was afterwards connected with the ancient Hebrew Jahweh-worship, and so Christianity came into being—one mythology among many, but the one that we happen to have been brought up in... Now all this you must have heard before: it is the recognized scientific account of the growth of religions. Superstition of course in every age has held the common people, but in every age the educated and thinking ones have stood outside it, though usually outwardly conceding to it for convenience... I must only add that one's views on religious subjects don't make any difference in morals, of course. A good member of society must of course try to be honest, chaste, truthful, kindly etc: these are things we owe to our own manhood & dignity and not to any imagined god or gods. (230-31; October 12, 1916)*

Twelve years later, however, with World War I battlefield service, intensive study as an Oxford undergraduate, and several years teaching experience as a tutor at Magdalen College all behind him, Lewis moves from atheism to the threshold of theism.

Although he is capable of writing to his father slighting comments about someone who "gets a number of young men together (some reports say women too, but I believe not) and they confess their sins to one another. Jolly, ain't it? But what can one do? If you try to suppress it... you only make martyrs" (751; Mar. 31, 1928).

Two years later in a letter to Greeves of Jan. 30, 1930 he is himself engaging in analysis of his own sins:

"Things are going very, very well with me (spiritually). On the other hand, one knows from bitter experience that he who standeth should take heed lest he fall, and that anything remotely like pride is certain to bring an awful crash. The old doctrine is quite true you know—that one must attribute everything to the grace of God, and nothing to oneself. Yet as long as one is a conceited ass, there is no good pretending not to be. My self-satisfaction cannot be hidden from God... [but] Pride [is] my besetting sin... During my afternoon meditations... I have found out ludicrous and terrible things about my own character. Sitting by, watching the rising thoughts to break their necks as they pop up, one learns to know the sort of thoughts that do come. And, will you believe it, one out of every three is a thought of self-admiration: when everything else fails, having had its neck broken, up comes the thought 'What an admirable fellow I am to have broken their necks!' I catch myself posturing before the mirror, so to speak, all day long. I pretend I am carefully thinking out what to say to the next pupil (for his good, of course) and then suddenly realize I am really thinking how frightfully clever I'm going to be and how he will admire me. I pretend I am remembering an evening of good fellowship in a really friendly and charitable spirit—and all the time I'm really remembering how good a fellow I am and how well I talked. And then when you force yourself to stop it, you admire yourself for doing that. It's like fighting the hydra (you remember, when you cut off one head another grew). There seems to be no end to it. Depth under depth of self-love and self admiration." (emphasis Lewis; 877, 878)

In February 1930 he feels the Hound of Heaven drawing nearer when he writes Owen Barfield: *"Terrible things are happening to me. The 'Spirit' or 'Real I' is showing an alarming tendency to become much more personal and is taking the offensive, and behaving just like God. You'd better come on Monday at the latest or I may have entered a monastery"* (882-83).

Lewis' movement to faith in Christ is amplified in three particular letters he writes to Greeves.

On December 24, 1930 Lewis writes: *"I think the trouble with me is lack of faith. I have no rational ground for going back on the arguments that convinced me of God's existence: but the irrational deadweight of my old skeptical habits, and the spirit of this age, and the cares of the day, steal away all my lively feeling of the truth, and often when I pray I wonder if I am not posting letters to a non-existent address."* (emphasis Lewis; 944-45).

On October 1, 1931 he adds: *"I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity. I will try to explain this another time. My long night talk with [Hugo] Dyson and [J. R. R.] Tolkien had a good deal to do with it"* (974).

All this culminates in his letter of October 18, 1931: *"What has been holding me back...has not been so much a difficulty in believing as a difficulty in knowing what the doctrine [of the incarnation] meant: you can't believe a thing while you are ignorant what the thing is. My puzzle was the whole doctrine of Redemption: in what sense the life and death of Christ "saved" or "opened salvation to" the whole world...What I couldn't see was how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago could help us here and now... Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself... I like it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was that in the Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose "what it meant." Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference - THAT IT REALLY HAPPENED: one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God's myth where the others are men's myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call "real things"*

Does this amount to a belief in Christianity? At any rate I am now certain (a) That this Christian story is to be approached, in a sense, as I approach the other myths. (b) That it is the most important and full of meaning. I am also nearly certain that it really happened." (emphasis Lewis; 976-77).

***When Lewis placed his trust in Christ for salvation he was described by one of his friends as the most thoroughly converted men he had ever met.