

Romans 11:1-12

From Failure to Fullness

Main idea: God loves us so much that He takes our failure, and freely gives us His fullness.

Thomas Edison is credited for inventing the lightbulb. Although it's fairly well-known that Thomas Edison relied on the discoveries and inventions of those that came before him, it's not as well-known that he borrowed \$300,000 to establish the Edison Electric Light Company in 1878, before he even invented the light bulb.¹ That's about \$9 million in today's dollars that he would have to pay back if he failed in his work. So imagine you have what you think is a great idea and then borrowing \$9 million in order to invent it. I'm not sure I could have that kind of confidence in my idea.

Edison's goal was to make light bulbs affordable and reliable for the average person. He would work up to 20 hours per day, testing various designs and filaments. In fact, it's estimated that he obtained around 6000 different organic materials such as copper, platinum, cedar, and hickory to find the perfect filament in order to improve on the incandescent lightbulb, and only three of them out of the 6000 he tested proved worth experimenting with more.

¹ <https://allthatsinteresting.com/who-invented-the-light-bulb>

Nine million in today's dollars, testing thousands of materials to find the best one. He failed over and over again, but each failure brought him that much closer to the solution.

Fast forward about 35 years later, after Edison had been successful in improving the lightbulb, and had even refined his own invention several times, making it better and better, there was a massive explosion at his factory, and more than half of his manufacturing building were in flames. Edison lost almost \$1 million worth of equipment, which would be worth about \$23 million today, not to mention the record of much of his work.²

The next morning, walking about the charred embers of his life's work, the 67-year-old inventor said this:

"There is value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Now we can start anew." -*Thomas Edison*

I don't know about you, but I've often felt as if I've failed at times in my life. And often when I feel like I've failed, I fear that I'll be rejected, whether by God or by people.³ But the beauty of the Christian message is that even after all our failed works are burnt up, God raises us out of the ashes, and makes us new.⁴

Romans 11:1-6

² <https://www.businessinsider.com/thomas-edison-in-the-obstacle-is-the-way-2014-5>

³ I'm comforted, though, that Jesus knows how I feel. Isaiah 53:3

⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:15, Revelation 21:1-5

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? Absolutely not! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Or don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he pleads with God against Israel? Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I am the only one left, and they are trying to take my life! But what was God's answer to him? I have left seven thousand for myself who have not bowed down to Baal. In the same way, then, there is also at the present time a remnant chosen by grace. Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace. (Romans 11:1-6)

Father, help us to rely on Your grace alone. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Do you believe that your relationship with God is based totally on God's grace?

I was talking with my counselor recently about the lies we often think about God, which can lead us to having all kinds of negative feelings about ourselves. He asked me to answer several questions as if I were answering them at my weakest moment. After asking me several questions, I realized that I wasn't giving him the answers he wanted, and it seemed like he even thought I was being dishonest in my answers. So I told him as straight-forward as I could, "I feel closer to God now than

I can ever remember, because I know that God is love and that there's absolutely nothing I can do that would cause Him to stop loving me. I can simply rest in His love and rejoice that He shows grace."

You see the thing is, if you're a Christian, God has completely forgiven you of all your sin: past, present, and future.⁵ And there's nothing you can ever say or do that will cause Him to reject you.⁶

And yet, there are things you can say and do that can cause you to feel as if God is punishing you.⁷ God disciplines those that He loves, and His discipline often feels like wrath.⁸ This was certainly the case for many of the Jews in the first century when they refused to receive Jesus as Savior.⁹

So Paul asked in verse 1, "Has God rejected his people?" The Jews were God's chosen people. Out of all the people on the earth, God chose them to bear His name and share His name with the whole world.¹⁰ And yet when they largely didn't receive Jesus, who is God in human flesh,¹¹ by doing so they also turned away from the God who chose them in the first place. So God began to discipline them so that they would stumble over

⁵ Psalm 103:12

⁶ Unless, of course, you're stronger than God. John 10:28

⁷ Hebrews 12:11

⁸ Revelation 3:19

⁹ Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, and everything Jesus did, He did out of love. Matthew 23, Luke 6:31-38, Romans 5:8

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 7:6

¹¹ John 1:14

the stumbling stone, who is Jesus.¹² But until they did, they would feel cut off and rejected.¹³

Sometimes you might wonder if God has rejected you. Maybe you feel like you've messed up too bad, or you haven't done enough good. But I want you to know that your relationship has nothing to do with what you do.¹⁴ It has everything to do with the promises that He Himself has made to you.¹⁵ It has everything to do with Jesus.

So Paul answers the question, "Has God rejected his people? Absolutely not!" And if you've received Jesus as your Savior, and yet you still sometimes feel rejected by God, know that it's not because of God that you feel that way. Satan is called the Accuser in the Bible, because even when we've been saved from our sins, he still tries to make us feel accused and guilty.¹⁶ But there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.¹⁷ God stands by His promises, and He's promised you eternal life.¹⁸

God made promises to the people of Israel, too.¹⁹ "Has God rejected his people? Absolutely not! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew."

¹² Romans 9:32-33

¹³ And they were "cut off," until they received Jesus. Romans 11:22-23

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 1:20, 1 John 1:9

¹⁶ 1 Peter 5:8, Revelation 12:10

¹⁷ Romans 8:1

¹⁸ John 3:16

¹⁹ Genesis 12:1-3, Deuteronomy 31:8, Isaiah 41:10, Jeremiah 29:11

So Paul's rationale for why God has clearly not rejected His people is simply that God foreknew them. God knew them before He made them. God loved them even before they existed, even before they loved Him, and even before they rejected Him.²⁰ Even though they were faithless, God remains faithful to His promises.²¹

God loves you the same way. Before you received Jesus, before you sinned, before you were born, and even before you were conceived, God knew you and loved you, and made a plan to save you by grace through faith in Jesus so that you could spend eternity with Him.²²

That's God's plan for you. But you need to trust in it.²³

End of verse 2.

Or don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he pleads with God against Israel? Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I am the only one left, and they are trying to take my life! But what was God's answer to him? I have left seven thousand for myself who have not bowed down to Baal. (Romans 11:2b-4)

²⁰ John 15:16, 1 John 4:19

²¹ 2 Timothy 2:13

²² Psalm 139:14-16, Jeremiah 1:5, Ephesians 1:4, Revelation 13:8

²³ Acts 2:38

In his desperation and possibly pride, Elijah thought that he was the only one in all of the people of Israel who actually had faith in God. But God answered Elijah, “No! You’re wrong! There are still seven thousand Israelites who I’ve kept from turning from Me.” Verse 5.

In the same way, there is also at the present time a remnant chosen by grace. Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace. (Romans 11:5-6)

I want you to notice two things about Paul’s statement. First, God’s election has to do with this present time. Calvinists tend to think that the doctrine of election primarily has to do with who will and won’t be saved in eternity, but Paul clearly says that God’s choosing has to do with this life. God chose us for a purpose, just as God chose Israel for a purpose, so that we would be a light to the world, pointing to the Light of the world, who is Jesus.²⁴

Secondly, notice that God chooses us for this purpose by grace, not because we’re equipped for the job. Arminians tend to think that we had a role in God saving us, almost like the thing that differentiates us from unbelievers is how we were wise enough to pray a certain prayer. But Scripture is clear that God chooses the weak of this world to shame the strong. He chooses the foolish to shame the wise.²⁵ And if you’re a Christian, He chose

²⁴ Isaiah 49:6, Matthew 5:14-16, John 8:12

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

you not because He needed you, but because He wanted you in your weakness to find strength in Christ.²⁶

Sometimes when we look back at our works, sometimes we want to boast in them, and sometimes we're ashamed. When we do well, we want to take all the credit, and when we fail, we often want to blame others, or else go into a deep depression. But Paul is reminding us that our position before God doesn't rely on our successes or our failures, but on His grace.²⁷

Verse 7.

What then? Israel did not find what it was looking for, but the elect did find it. The rest were hardened, as it is written, God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear, to this day. And David says, Let their table become a snare and a trap, a pitfall and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and their backs be bent continually. (Romans 11:7-10)

Now, once again, I want to remind you that election at least in this context has to do with this present time, and therefore hardening also has to do with this present time. Paul quoted Deuteronomy 29:4, which says:

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 12:9

²⁷ Jeremiah 9:23-24, John 1:16

Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand, eyes to see, or ears to hear. (Deuteronomy 29:4)

In context, Moses was talking to the people of Israel because they were continually turning from God. It was fulfilled in history regarding that generation of Israel, and yet Paul seems to be saying that it also applies to the present. And yet in both cases, it's limited by the phrase, "to this day."

God certainly hardened their hearts, just as God hardened Pharaoh's heart,²⁸ and just as He hardened all of our hearts before He granted each of us grace to see Jesus.²⁹ But that's all temporary until the time when God opened our eyes,³⁰ and will open the eyes of all Israel.

Verse 11.

I ask, then, have they stumbled so as to fall? Absolutely not! On the contrary, by their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel jealous. Now if their transgression brings riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness bring! (Romans 11:11-12)

²⁸ Exodus 9:12

²⁹ Romans 1:28

³⁰ Acts 26:18, Ephesians 1:18

If those verses don't fill us with hope, and joy, and awe at just how big God's plan is, I'm not sure we've dwelt on them enough. God's plan is both terrifying and full of wonder because of how all-encompassing it truly is. You see, God hardens for a time, until another time.³¹ God allowed Israel to fail and fall away so that the gospel would come to us, the Gentiles.³²

And it says that He did this to make Israel jealous. I mean, they were the people of God. The chosen. They were God's children. But because of their disobedience, in large part, at one point in the Old Testament, God says that He divorced His people.

So God wanted the Israelites to get jealous, not in an evil sense, but in a good sense. God wanted the Israelites to see just how good He would be to the nations that received Jesus.³³ He wanted to see how the Gentiles rejoiced in God their Savior.³⁴ He wanted the Israelites to remember the great blessings that God promises those who rest in His steadfast love.³⁵ But until they humbled themselves before the God who chose them, they would have hard hearts.³⁶

But this was only for a time. Paul writes in verse 12, "Now if their transgression brings riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness bring!"

³¹ Romans 9:18

³² Romans 11:32

³³ Psalm 107:1

³⁴ Psalm 34:8

³⁵ Psalm 31:19, Nahum 1:7

³⁶ Ezekiel 36:26

Israel's transgression and failure led to riches for the world. And, if that's the case, Paul invites us to just imagine what it will mean when the fullness of Israel's inclusion back into the fold comes about! Paul is saying, man, if you think you're blessed by God now, just wait until God really brings about the fulfillment of all His promises!

As Paul also wrote:

“What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”— the things God has prepared for those who love him. (1 Corinthians 2:9)

God has so much blessing in store for you, we can't even conceive of it right now! When the fullness, the entirety, of Israel comes in, receiving Jesus as Savior, we'll also have a fullness of God's riches that we can't even imagine!

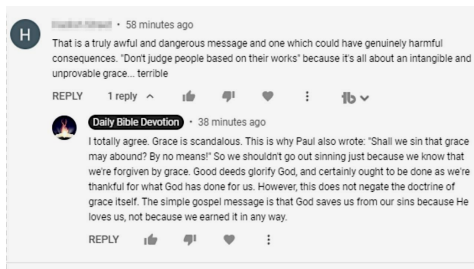
You see, God loves us so much that He takes our failure, and freely gives us His fullness. And He even transforms our failure into fullness.

So, once again, if you've been feeling like a failure, rest in Jesus. He will cleanse you, reminding you of His love for you, and transform you from the inside out.³⁷

³⁷ 1 John 1:9, Galatians 5:22-23

I posted a devotional online one day last week talking about grace, and someone commented on it saying that my understanding of grace could lead to immoral living. I mean, if God just forgives all our sin, what's keeping us from doing bad things?

[Picture of comment]



Here's what I responded. I said: "I totally agree. Grace is scandalous. This is why Paul also wrote: 'Shall we sin that grace may abound? By no means!' So we shouldn't go out sinning just because we know that we're forgiven by grace. Good deeds glorify God, and certainly ought to be done as we're thankful for what God has done for us. However, this does not negate the doctrine of grace itself. The simple gospel message is that God saves us from our sins because He loves us, not because we earned it in any way."