

Romans 4:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

(As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.

Analysis

(As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. Paul quotes Genesis 17:5, but in its original context, this statement was made after circumcision. Paul's point is that the promise itself defines Abraham's role regardless of circumcision's timing—God declared Abraham father of pollōn ethnōn (πολλῶν ἔθνῶν, "many nations"), not just Israel. The parenthetical nature of this clause suggests the promise's fulfillment is now evident in the multi-ethnic church.

Paul then describes the God Abraham believed: tou zōopoιountos tous nekrouς (τοῦ ζωοποιοῦντος τοὺς νεκρούς, "the one giving life to the dead") and kalountos ta mē onta hōs onta (καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα, "calling the things not being as being"). God's creative power is twofold: resurrection life and creatio ex nihilo. Abraham's faith was in God's ability to create Isaac from his deadness and Sarah's barrenness, and ultimately to raise the dead. This same resurrection power justifies sinners (v. 24-25), making this description programmatic.

Historical Context

The phrase 'father of many nations' would have been understood messianically in Second Temple Judaism, pointing to God's universal reign. Paul shows its fulfillment in the gospel going to the Gentiles. The characterization of God as life-giving and creative echoes Genesis 1 and anticipates Romans 8's new creation theology. Abraham's faith in God's resurrection power makes him the model for Christian faith in Christ's resurrection.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How does Genesis 17:5's 'father of many nations' prove Paul's point about Abraham fathering both Jewish and Gentile believers?
2. Why does Paul emphasize God's power to give life to the dead and call into existence things that don't exist?
3. How is Abraham's faith in God's creative and resurrection power a model for saving faith in Christ today?

Interlinear Text

καθὼς γέγραπται ὅτι Πατέρα πολλῶν ἐθνῶν τέθεικά^{τε}
(As it is written a father of many nations I have made
G2531 G1125 G3754 G3962 G4183 G1484 G5087

σε κατέναντι οὐ ἐπίστευσεν θεοῦ τοῦ
thee before him whom he believed even God G3588
G4571 G2713 G3739 G4100 G2316

ζωοποιοῦντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ^{τοῦ}
who quickeneth the dead and calleth G3588 not
G2227 G3498 G2532 G2564 G3588 G3361

ὄντα· ὡς ὄντα·
they were as though they were
G5607 G5613 G5607

Additional Cross-References

1 Corinthians 1:28 (References God): And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

John 5:21 (Parallel theme): For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.

John 6:63 (Parallel theme): It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

1 Peter 2:10 (References God): Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.

Romans 8:11 (Parallel theme): But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

John 5:25 (References God): Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

Hebrews 11:12 (Parallel theme): Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

Isaiah 55:12 (Parallel theme): For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isaiah 48:13 (Parallel theme): Mine hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spanned the heavens: when I call unto them, they stand up together.

Romans 3:29 (References God): Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also:

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