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Exodus 4:1-17¹

God's Exodus People:

New Year. Fresh Belief.

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Have any of you made a New Year's resolution for 2017? I don't normally, but there are a lot of people who do. According to Time Magazine, the *Top 10 Commonly Broken New Year's Resolutions* are:²

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|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Lose weight and get fit | 6. Spend more time with family |
| 2. Quit smoking | 7. Travel to new places |
| 3. Learn something new | 8. Be less stressed |
| 4. Eat healthier and diet | 9. Volunteer |
| 5. Get out of debt and save money | 10. Drink less |

Jacob from the UK tweeted on January 1st, "my new years resolution is to figure out how to squeeze a 4th and 5th meal into my day."³ New Years resolutions are fun to make, but hard to keep. Adrienne tweeted, "My 2017 resolution is to work on my low self esteem, but I don't think I can do it."

The life cycle of a New Year's resolution starts strong. In January, you hit the gym, eat guacamole, and cut back on sweets, but that get's old fast. February comes and you know you need to show your special someone that you care about them with chocolates. One study "shows that February 4th (37 days after New Years's)" is the most likely day people quit.⁴ By march, you're hitting the pizza, wearing sweats, and breaking in your used couch; you'll go for a run when it get's warm outside.

Do you think Moses ever made a New Year's resolutions? I bet when he was young, and being raised in Pharaoh's court by Pharaoh's daughter, he made all of sorts of promises to himself. "I resolve to master archery, horse racing, linguistics, public speaking. I resolve to become the Pharaoh's right-hand man." Then one day, Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, he murders the Egyptian, and just like that, all of his resolutions go down the drain.

Instead of climbing the ladder of Egyptian success, Moses flees into the wilderness, traveling to the far away land of Midian. There he marries a backcountry shepherd's daughter and joins the family business. Moses was 40 years old when he fled Egypt, in the prime of his life, and now he's a poor shepherd with no hopes and no dreams. We can imagine that year by year his resolutions change from going home to Egypt to don't get eaten by a bear or a lion, don't kill the sheep, die a peaceful death.

¹ ¹ All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

² <http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,2040218,00.html> Published 2012. (accessed 2017.01.06).

³ *The 13 funniest tweets about New Year resolutions.* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/02/13-funniest-tweets-new-year-resolutions/> Published January 2nd 2017. (accessed 2017.01.06).

⁴ *Apps Track How We Fail to Keep New Year's Resolutions* <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/december/3122616.html> Shelly Ridenour, "Online grocer finds New Year's resolutions last about a month," New York Post (2-21-16) (accessed 2017.01.06).

Moses is 80 years old when God breaks into his life and gives him a resolution. God appears to Moses in a burning bush, saying, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt... I am sending you [Moses] to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (3:7, 10) Moses, of course, get’s up and goes right to Egypt. No. Not even close. Instead, he objects; in fact he gives **three objections** in the form of questions:

1. **Who am I? (3:11-12)**
2. **Who are you? (3:13-22)**
3. **What if they don’t believe? (4:1-17)⁵**

Two weeks ago Andy explained God’s first two answers. To the “Who am I?” God answers, “I’m the one who matters and I am with you.” And to Moses’s second objection, “Who are you?” God says, “I AM WHO I AM”; meaning, “I am enough, I am undefinable, I am all powerful, but care for you.” God is going to answer the third objection, “What if they don’t believe?” by challenging Moses, “Why don’t you believe?”

When we talk about New Year’s resolutions, it’s always in the context of, “I made a resolution.” It’s about me. What if God made your New Year’s resolution this year? To me, God’s resolution for Moses and the people of Israel is to believe him, so I think it’s fair to extend that same resolution to us. **God’s resolution for us is to believe.** But what is going to prevent this resolution going the way of all the others? This resolution won’t make it a week unless we begin to understand what God taught Moses.

I. God gives us reasons to believe. (4:1-9)

When Moses’ hears God’s promises, he asks, “What if they do not believe me...?” Moses is standing in front of a bush that’s on fire and not burning up but he’s an 80-year old man full of fear and doubt. God has compassion on Moses, giving him **three reasons/signs** to believe. They’re not scientific reasons, like apologetics, but reasons rooted in God’s character, who he is and what he does.

1. Serpent / God will overcome Pharaoh (4:3-5)

God tells Moses to throw down his staff. When he does, it turns into a snake. And Moses runs! This is his first opportunity to believe, but he fails. Then God says, “Pick up that snake by the tail, Moses.” The Bible doesn’t record Moses reply, “What God? That’s super dangerous.” Instead, he makes a decision to believe. He picks it up and it turns into a staff. Then God tells him “I’m the same God as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, your forefathers. They believed in me and I never let them down. Now it’s your turn to believe.”

The snake, in ancient Egypt, was a symbol called the **uraeus**.⁶ The uraeus symbolized a deity who ruled over the Nile and protected Egypt.⁷ The snake symbol appears all around Egypt, but in one place in particular, on Pharaoh’s crown. The uraeus also symbolized the royal power of the king. That’s why you can find it in on this golden mummy’s mask (left) and on this statue’s crown (right).⁸ When God turns Moses’ staff into a

⁵ Adapted from *Exodus for You* by Tim Chester, page 31.

⁶ IVP OT Background Commentary. Exodus 4:1-9.

⁷ Wikipedia contributors, 'Uraeus', Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 21 November 2016, 15:46 UTC, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Uraeus&oldid=750742405>> [accessed 21 November 2016]

⁸ I’m referencing the golden mummy mask of Tutankhamun (left) and the Statue from Abu Simbel (right).

snake, he's implying, "Moses, I, the God of your ancestors, will overcome Pharaoh. He's nothing but a snake to me; he's scary, but I will pick him up by his tail. Moses, trust I am good like Abraham did, and Isaac, and Jacob. I made a promise to rescue their family, and you're part of that promise now."

Application: What's your snake? What scares you away from God instead of towards God? Maybe it's money. You lost your job or have an unexpected expense, so you're thinking about getting a second or third job, but if you do, it will take you away from church and you won't have time to pray and read your Bible. I think God is giving you this opportunity to press into him, to trust him with your finances, not to chase you away from him. How might you grab your issue by the tail, and lift it up to God, trusting you're safe with him? God has been faithful to generations of Christians; he'll be faithful to you. The alternative is to let whatever you're going through bite and poison you. Only 45% of people who make New Year's resolutions achieve them.⁹ In MA, only 17% of the population has an active faith; defined as weekly church attendance, prayer, and Bible study.¹⁰ By God's grace, you don't have to be a statistic. *God can overcome your unbelief.*

2. Leprosy / God brings life out of death (4:6)

The next sign God gives Moses is leprosy. Now, this probably wasn't Hansen's disease, but it was some sort of bad skin disease that would have made Moses' hand appear deathly white. You would not have wanted to shake his hand; at least until God healed him. God heals Moses' hand. It dies and God brings it back to life. This is what we call **resurrection faith**—It's trusting God can bring life out of death.

Illustration: I saw t-shirts in the news about how bad 2016 was as a year. I assume those who purchased the t-shirts did so mostly because they felt disappointed by politics or celebrity passings. Maybe you also feel like 2016 wasn't your favorite year, but for other reasons, a job layoff, a health scare, a failed relationship, a death in the family. No matter how bad last year felt, or the year before it, we can have fresh hope as we trust in God because our God is a resurrection God. He brings life out of death.

3. Blood / God is waging a spiritual battle (4:7)

The last sign God gives Moses is turning water from the Nile into blood. This sign foreshadows, or looks ahead, to the plagues God is going to send of the nation of Egypt, the first of which is turning the Nile into blood. When we go through the plagues, we're going to see that in each plague God is countering one of Egypt's false gods. For example, Osiris was one of Egypt's gods over the Nile. When Moses turns the Nile into blood, he's showing the God of Israel, not the god of Egypt, is the one with the true power.¹¹

Moses' struggle to believe God is more than just a physical battle in this world. Ultimately, God is fighting a spiritual battle for the heart of Moses and the Israelites. I want us to go back for a moment to the symbol of the snake Pharaoh wore on his crown. Do you remember another snake in the Bible? In the garden of Eden the devil, Satan, took the form of a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve, the very first humans. They sinned and as a result God cursed Adam, Eve, and the serpent. When God cursed the serpent, Satan, he promised one of

⁹ Statistic Brain, < a href="http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/" target=_blank">"New Year's Resolution Statistics" (10-27-16) via <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/december/7121216.html> (accessed 2017.01.06).

¹⁰ Massachusetts: State Report 2015 with comparative data from the Northeast Region. Barna Group. Page 18.

¹¹ <http://www.biblecharts.org/oldtestament/thetenplagues.pdf> (accessed 2017.01.06).

Eve's descendants would defeat Satan the serpent. This is the **proto-euangelion**, which means "the first gospel" or "the first good-news" and it's found in **Genesis 3:15**, where God says to the snake:

And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel." (NIV®)

Now clearly Moses is not going to be the one to crush the serpent's head. When he sees a snake, he runs the other way. But the **whole book of Exodus** is a spiritual battle, and God is going to use Moses in that battle. When Moses confronts Pharaoh, God is confronting Satan and his demons. God is delivering the Israelites from physical slavery to Pharaoh as he begins to deliver them from spiritual slavery to Satan. But there's **another tension** that runs through Exodus. God seeks to save people, but they don't want to be saved.¹² God tries to help Moses believe, but Moses doesn't want to believe. God seeks to lead the Israelites out of bondage, but they don't want to be free.

Application: Do you want to be saved? Do you want to believe and be set free? That same tension pulls all our hearts. God calls us to believe, but we don't want to. **What reasons do you need to believe God?** Chances are, God isn't going to transform your tap water into blood, but he can show you that he is good. As a church, God has given us lots of reasons to believe in him; *Ten Reasons to Believe*:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Conversions | 6. Pastor's story |
| 2. New families | 7. Building |
| 3. Numerical growth | 8. Parent church |
| 4. Challenged faith | 9. Autonomy - Last week in June |
| 5. Volunteers | 10. Empty tomb |

The most important sign of them all is the **empty tomb**. The empty tomb tells us the story of the serpent's defeat. God sent his son Jesus into this world to rescue us. In order for God to rescue us from the **serpent's poison**, sin, Jesus had to take it upon himself on the cross. That's where he died as a sacrifice. Because he was sinless, God raised Jesus from the grave. Now the tomb is empty; and whoever puts their faith in Jesus gets the anecdote for their poisonous sin, the blood of Jesus. *God gives us reasons to believe...*

II. God strengthens our belief in our weakness. (4:10-13)

God gives Moses all of these reasons to believe, but still he objects; he says, "I don't talk well. I've never been good with words..."¹³ Maybe God should have used him when he was 40 and strong, not when he was 80 and near death. God reminds Moses that he is the one who gives people the ability to speak, hear, and see. He says, "I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." In other words, "I will give you what you need when you need it. Believe in me and I'll use you. Depend on me and my power, not your own."

¹² Word Biblical Commentary. Exodus 4

¹³ The Message, Exodus 4:10.

The English writer Samuel Johnson wrote in his diary every year, asking God to help him not be so lazy. In 1738 he wrote, “Oh Lord, enable me to redeem the time which I have spent in sloth.” Every year he wrote some variation of that prayer. Nineteen years after the original he wrote, “Oh mighty God, enable me to shake off sloth and redeem the time misspent in idleness and sin by diligent application of the days yet remaining.”¹⁴ He wrote that prayer for 38 long years. I don’t think that was a failure. As Christians, we need to admit our weakness, and call out to God for help.

I do a lot of Crossfit because I want to be strong. But God isn’t interested in my strength, but my weakness, and he’s interested in yours too. Coming back from vacation last week was rough. You’re supposed to come back refreshed from vacation and ready to get back to work; but on Tuesday on our trip home, Monica and I got the flu. So last week I was praying, “God, I’m physically and mentally weak, would you help me out? Would you give me a sermon?” He did, and then he gave me a snowstorm to really help me out. God wants our weakness, our dependency, our prayers.

That’s my story, what’s yours? How is God teaching you to depend on him, to truly believe? Is he asking you to recognize your weakness in your marriage, your parenting, your job, your studies? It seems like the most popular New Year’s resolution is to get in shape. As Christians, we’re called to get weak, to get dependent, to get needy. When people ask you about your New Year’s resolution, you have my permission to say, “I want get weaker.” *God gives us reasons to believe; and God likes to use us in our weakness, but...*

III. We need help to believe. (4:14-17)

Moses, plays his final card at the end, “God, I just don’t want to do what you’re asking.” You know, God get’s angry. It says his “anger burned against Moses.” Our unbelief angers God, but instead of killing Moses and us, he extends mercy. The God of Christianity is a patient God who calls us to believe him and loves us even when we doubt. Moses feels too old at 80? God sends him an 83-year old helper, his brother Aaron. If you want to trust God more this year, if you want deeper faith, get a helper, get a partner.

Jean was overweight all her life, in high-school, and into her twenties and thirties. She tried everything, pills, diets, but none of them worked. At 38 she tried a new program and lost twenty pounds, but also began to lose motivation. So she brought the weight-loss program to her friends. They talked about it together, began to hold each other accountable, and began to lose weight together. Out of this Jean founded Weight Watchers, now worth hundreds of millions of dollars, all because she realized she could not lose weight alone.¹⁵

Application: We can’t believe alone. We need help. Moses struggled to believe God and he could see God. He needed a partner, how much more do we need partners in the faith? If you’re struggling to believe, ask a brother or sister in Jesus to meet with you regularly to talk about your faith, read the Bible, pray, and confess sins. I have a friend down in Virginia that I try to FaceTime every other week. We talk about God, confess sins, and encourage each other. It’s not complicated but it is helpful.

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson’s Failed New Year’s Resolutions <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/december/7122214.html> (accessed 2017.01.06). Adapted from Tullian Tchividjian, *It is Finished* (David C. Cook, 2015), page 1

¹⁵ <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2009/december/5122109.html> (accessed 2017.01.07). Gino Grunberg, Gig Harbor, Washington, and Brian Lowery, managing editor, *PreachingToday.com*; source: Keith Ferrazzi, *Who's Got Your Back?* (Broadway Business, 2009), pp. 9-10

If you are wrestling with doubt, one of the first ways Satan will try to tempt you is to get you **away from church**, to draw you away from regular Christian fellowship. Maybe Moses had a hard time believing because he was living far away in Midian, not in Egypt with fellow believers. We grow together, not apart. I encourage you, this year, press into your church family; don't pull away; come in. Make a New Year's resolution to be here every week so that your belief grows strong.

If we read the rest of chapter four, we see Moses taking all of God's signs to the people of Israel. And guess what? They believe! Despite Moses's fears, verses 30b-31 says, "[Moses] also performed the signs before the people, and they believed. And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped." (NIV®) God gives Moses help and then Moses gives the Israelites help. We can help others as we've been helped. *God gives us reasons to believe. God strengthens our belief in our weakness. We need help to believe.*

God's resolution for us is to believe.

I very real temptation is to walk away from this sermon trying really hard to believe in God; and then when doubt creeps into your mind and heart in a few weeks, to start feeling weighed down by guilt. Don't! That's not what I want you to walk away with. I want you to know right now that we cannot believe perfectly. If you have put your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you will sometimes struggle with doubt.

What's why we need the gospel. There are apps that track the success rate of **New Year's resolutions**. Remember how I said February 4th is the day most people quit their New Year's resolutions? We know that because apps watched where users would check in and found an increase in fast-food restaurants and a decrease in checking in at the gym on that date.¹⁶

The **gospel** is the good news that everyday we fail but everyday Jesus succeeds. We fail to check in with God perfectly, but Jesus doesn't. On those days when we struggle to trust God, Jesus trusts God perfectly on our behalf. God doesn't call for perfect faith, he calls for faith in his perfect Son, Jesus. Jesus goes to the gym for us every single day, for the rest of our lives, for all eternity. He lifts the weight of our sin so we don't have to.

Knowing Jesus has us covered frees us from guilt and helps us believe in him everyday with joy. Before God gave us this resolution to believe, he took it upon himself; and accomplished it perfectly. Now he invites us to join him in the celebration, in the happy New Year.

God's resolution for us is to believe in Jesus.

2 Corinthians 13:11 Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. (NIV®)

¹⁶ ¹⁶ *Apps Track How We Fail to Keep New Year's Resolutions* <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/december/3122616.html> Shelly Ridenour, "Online grocer finds New Year's resolutions last about a month," New York Post (2-21-16) (accessed 2017.01.06).