

## **Exodus 4:24-26**

### **Introduction**

Exodus 4:24–26 — At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and caused it to touch his feet and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” So he let him alone. It was then that she said, “A bridegroom of blood,” because of the circumcision.

One person says: “Biblical scholars love this passage because it is totally incomprehensible.’ And if it is incomprehensible to the scholar, what about the other 98 percent of Bible students and readers?” (Hamilton, quoting PENCHANSKY) It *is impossible* to be *sure* about a *huge number* of the *details* in this passage. I’ve never seen any passage with even close to as many puzzles as this one has. And yet in the end, we know that God has placed this passage in His Word, and given it to us for a reason. So we know that at least the main point must *not* be incomprehensible to us. This morning, I’m going to give you my best “take” on the details because how we interpret the details can be important. Our interpretation of the details can help us to better understand and appreciate the main point of the passage.

**I. Exodus 4:24a** — At a lodging place on the way...

We should stop for a moment just to appreciate those wonderful words! *Finally*, Moses is *officially* “on the way” back to Egypt from Midian. It’s been a long, drawn out ordeal as Moses had plenty of objections and reasons not to go, but God would not be put off. He answered every objection, made provision for Moses’ weakness of faith, and came to Moses over and over again with words to comfort, and encourage, and strengthen him. Over the last two weeks, Moses has learned that all the men who were seeking his life are dead, that God is *sovereign* even over Pharaoh’s sinful stubbornness and rebellion, and that Israel is to God as His own *son* – even His *firstborn son*.

And then this: “At a lodging place on the way...”

**II. Exodus 4:24b** — ...the LORD met him and sought to put him to death.

Met *whom*, and sought to put *whom* to death? I think it’s clear that the majority of commentators are right: “At a lodging place on the way the Lord met *Moses* and sought to put *Moses* to death.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Currid and Stuart believe that the person whose life is in danger is Moses’ firstborn son, Gershom. They argue for the firstborn (rather than Eliezer) on the basis of the preceding context where God claims Israel as His firstborn son and says that He will kill Pharaoh’s firstborn son. Childs, Hamilton, Enns, Durham, VanGemen, Motyer, Calvin, Lange, and Keil (cf. NASB, ESV, NKJV study Bibles and NET translation notes) all assume that God is seeking to kill Moses. Those who argue for Gershom argue backwards from their exegesis of other debated portions. For them, Gershom as the referent makes the most sense of the rest of the passage, and so they appear to ignore the awkwardness of the text suddenly referring to Gershom without any sign or warning. Those who argue for Moses as the referent, do so on the basis of “common sense” (cf. Durham) and proceed to exegete the remainder of the hotly debated portions accordingly.

Now this is the *same* Moses that God has just “put up with” for a very long time. This is the same Moses that God has insisted *must* go to Egypt even in spite of all his objections and lack of faith. And now, as Moses is finally “on the way” and we all breath a sigh of relief, we suddenly find that Moses’ life is forfeit – not to Pharaoh or the Egyptians, but to God! In verse nineteen the Lord said to Moses: “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were *seeking* your life are dead.” And now we read in verse 24 that as Moses journey’s back to Egypt, it’s the *Lord* who *seeks* Moses’ life to put him to death – the Lord, who just reassured Moses that all the men who were seeking his life are dead.

And so right away we ask: “What happened?” What happened to the God of mercy and tender compassion who calls Israel His firstborn son?” What did Moses do, that God should suddenly be seeking his life – now that he’s finally on his way? “At a lodging place on the way the LORD met [Moses] and sought to put him to death.”

**II. Exodus 4:25a** —Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin...

Zipporah, we know, is Moses’ wife (cf. 2:21), and the one thing that’s obvious here is that somehow she believes—or hopes—that by circumcising her son, Moses’ life will be spared. It seems most likely that when the Lord “met” Moses at their lodging, He said something to the effect of: “Because you have failed to circumcise your son, therefore you must die.”<sup>2</sup> And so hearing what the Lord has said, Zipporah acts quickly in an effort to save Moses’ life.

Normally, circumcising was the responsibility of the father, so I assume that Zipporah has to take over now because Moses is incapacitated by the threat on his life.<sup>3</sup> Some imagine that Moses had a deadly sickness, or was suffering a seizure. But I think it’s more likely that we should envision something like the angel of the Lord standing over him with sword drawn. (cf. Num. 22:22-31) The reason I think this is because of the fact that the Lord “met” Moses at the lodging. In other words, the Lord “confronted” Moses at the lodging. And then in verse 26 we’ll see that the Lord “let him alone,” or as some translate more literally, “the Lord backed away from him.” (Hamilton)<sup>4</sup> This doesn’t require, but I do think it supports the idea of a “personal” confrontation between the Lord (perhaps the angel of the Lord) and Moses. So as Moses is facing imminent death at the hand of the Lord, his wife *very quickly* circumcises their son in order that his life might be saved.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Durham assumes that God’s wrath is directed against Moses because he himself has not been circumcised. But Stuart persuasively points out that if Moses was not circumcised by his parents (Amram and Jochebed, then “his adoptive mother, the daughter of Pharaoh, might have been the one to have had him circumcised but in the Egyptian manner, the partial circumcision condemned in Josh 5:9. It is very likely that prior to his marriage to a Midianite priest’s daughter Moses would have been circumcised fully, so the issue of disobedience to God that occasions Yahweh’s wrath here does not relate to Moses’ own circumcision at this point in his life.”

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Childs, Hamilton, Motyer, VanGemeren

<sup>4</sup> The KJV says, “so he let him go,” the YLT says, “he desisteth from him;” Durham says, “he backed off” or “fell away.”

<sup>5</sup> Childs finds it unusual that the child should be designated “*her* son.” VanGemeren concludes: “That Moses was the object of the divine action [attack] is clear from the fact that the otherwise unspecified son in v.25 would need to be identified as belonging to someone other than Moses.” VanGemeren could well be right, but I’m more inclined to the view that since, for *whatever* reason, Zipporah is doing the circumcising, it is only natural to say that she was circumcising “her son”! (cf. Gen. 27:17; 1 Sam. 1:23; 1 Kings 14:5) In this particular context, wouldn’t it have been even more strange to say that she cut off “his son’s” foreskin?

“Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin...”

**III. Exodus 4:25b** — ...and caused it to touch his feet...

Zipporah caused it to touch *whose* feet?<sup>6</sup> And *why*? The point doesn’t seem to be that she threw it at Moses’ feet as an expression of anger and frustration (as some translations say), but rather that Zipporah was careful to make it *touch* someone’s feet.<sup>7</sup> What Zipporah goes on to say *while* she’s doing this is, “you are a bridegroom(?) of *blood* to me.” Zipporah’s touching of the foreskin to the feet is therefore *connected* with the subject or the idea of *blood*. So I think we can assume here that what she’s doing is carefully smearing the *blood* of the circumcision either on her son, or on her husband, and I believe her husband is the most likely choice.<sup>8</sup>

But why does she do this? Well, when it comes to the child, the circumcision itself is a visible “sign.” But it’s *Moses’* life that is in danger for *his* failure to circumcise his son. So I think of the angel of the Lord standing over Moses with sword drawn. Zipporah quickly circumcises her son, and then touches the blood of the foreskin to Moses’ feet as a sign that the circumcision has been performed<sup>9</sup> and so therefore to avert God’s wrath, causing the angel of the Lord to back away from Moses and spare his life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Feet” *may* be a euphemism for genitals here, but this seems impossible to know for sure and unlikely to make any significant difference to our exegesis (unless touching the foreskin to Moses’ genitals was a sign of vicarious circumcision; but see note 11 below).

<sup>7</sup> YLT; NASB marg. note; cf. NET; ESV; NRSV; NIV; NLT; NCV; and see especially Stuart. A few translations say that Zipporah *threw* it at *Moses’* feet. (cf. NASB; HCSB; ASV; KJV; NKJV) The obvious idea here is that this is an expression of Zipporah’ frustration and anger with Moses. (cf. Calvin; Keil; Lange) It may be that Zipporah is frustrated and angry, but the more natural interpretation/translation at this point in the text emphasizes the *touching* of the foreskin to the feet (cf. Stuart; Lev. 5:2; 22:6; 1 Kings 6:27; Esther 5:2; Job 4:5). There is also a much more obvious Hebrew word for “throw” if that had truly been the idea here.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. NET; ESV; NRSV; NIV; NCV; Motyer; VanGemeren. That Zipporah is smearing the blood on her son could be supported by the fact that the nearest antecedent for “his feet” is “her son.” But “nearest antecedents” don’t seem to matter much in this passage! That Zipporah smears the blood on her husband is supported by the assumption that it is her husband’s life that is in danger. *IF* we conclude that Zipporah’s next words are addressed to Moses (as I believe is almost certainly the case), this also supports the idea that the blood is smeared on Moses. Finally, if, as I have suggested, the angel of the Lord is standing over Moses with sword drawn, it seems much more appropriate/logical to envision Zipporah smearing the blood on Moses. In the end, though, I would suggest that the main point of the smearing of the blood is not affected regardless of which view we take. (see Sermon)

<sup>9</sup> Childs says, “The smearing of the blood [on the child] serves as a visible demonstration that circumcision had indeed been performed.” But why should there need to be the visible sign of the smeared blood on the child *in addition* to the already visible sign of the circumcision of the child? It’s easier to see a need for the sign of the blood on Moses if he himself was not circumcised, and yet it was his life that was endangered.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Currid. Since Stuart and Currid both believe that the child is the one whose life is in danger, they naturally conclude that the blood is also smeared *on the child*. Stuart assumes that Zipporah touched the foreskin to Gershom as a symbolic act perhaps intended to “legitimize the previously neglected and now emergency circumcision.” Currid understands the blood to be a protective sign against Yahweh’s wrath which would otherwise result in the death of *the child* (analogous to the blood of the Passover lamb). VanGemeren suggests: “To further underscore this connection between Moses’ grave condition and the circumcision of his son, Zipporah took the excised prepuce and touched Moses’ feet.” Motyer assumes that the blood was smeared on Moses as “a way of identifying the incapacitated Moses with what Zipporah had done.” Durham, assuming that God is angry with Moses because *he* (Moses) had not been circumcised, views the circumcision of Moses son as a “vicarious circumcision of Moses” – thus, the smeared blood of the son on the father. This last explanation seems *most* unlikely. For one thing, a

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**IV. Exodus 4:25c** — ...and [she] said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!”<sup>11</sup>

Some people hear Zipporah lashing out at Moses in anger and frustration.<sup>12</sup> But I’m not at all convinced of this. The first thing we have to ask is why Zipporah would refer to her husband as her “bridegroom.” It certainly seems strange – especially since we can assume it’s been a very long time since Moses was a bridegroom.<sup>13</sup> So why does she say “*bridegroom of blood*”? What does it mean?

Well, circumcision was practiced in many other nations besides Israel, but the one main difference is that it was never practiced on infants. Instead, these other nations would perform circumcision at puberty “as a rite of initiation for manhood and marriage.”<sup>14</sup> In some cultures, circumcision might have been performed only in preparation for an actual wedding ceremony

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vicarious circumcision would seem to be contradicted by the very meaning of circumcision. For another thing, this explanation assumes that the son, also, had not been circumcised. Would this not also have been a serious problem?

<sup>11</sup> Stuart believes that the Hebrew word for “bridegroom” (*hatan*) can refer to a relative of any kind (by blood or by marriage), and so he translates, “surely you are a blood relative to me,” assuming that Zipporah is speaking to her son. Currid says that *hatan* refers to a blood relative *via* any kind of covenant relationship (not necessarily marriage), and so he translates, “[you are] a covenant-relation of blood [to me]” (speaking of the covenant community marked out by circumcision). Currid also assumes that Zipporah is addressing these words to her son. Currid’s view seems especially “creative” to me. From my own study of *hatan* it seems clear that it should either be translated “son-in-law” or “bridegroom.” (cf. Hamilton; Allen, NIDOT) Bridegroom clearly seems to be the best of these two options with Zipporah therefore addressing her words to her husband. (cf. almost all translations and commentators)

<sup>12</sup> Cf. VanGemeren; Kaiser; Allen; Keil; Lange; Calvin. VanGemeren writes: “Her words of reproach—‘Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me’—indicate that the root of the problem was in her revulsion and disgust with this rite of [infant/child?] circumcision.” Noting that the word for “blood” here is plural (*damim*; bloodshed) Hamilton references Frolov who “observes that elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible the plural of ‘bloods,’ with a noun standing in construct with it and denoting a person or a group of people, always suggests something negative, something evil.” (cf. cf. Trebilco, NIDOT) At least initially, this appears to be a very strong point in favor of Zipporah being frustrated and angry. However, I believe the *context* here in Exodus 4 is sufficiently *unique* so as to allow for a possibly *positive* reference (cf. 1 Chron. 22:8?) rather than a negative one (see sermon). Hamilton himself (cf. Motyer) sees Zipporah as a hero and is shocked that she should be “vilified” by some commentators. Those who do “vilify” Zipporah usually assume that Zipporah is the one who was against the circumcision. Since apparently only one son is circumcised at this time, they assume this is Eliezer (the 2<sup>nd</sup> born), and that while Zipporah had “given in” with Gershom (the firstborn), she resisted more strongly with Eliezer.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton says bluntly: “Moses is hardly a bridegroom.” Some would translate “*hatan*” as “husband,” but everywhere else in the OT the reference is very specifically to a bridegroom at the time of the marriage ceremony. (cf. Ps. 19:5; Isa. 61:10; 62:5; Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11; Joel 2:16; also see O’Connell, NIDOT) Additionally, *ish* would be the much more obvious word for “husband.”

<sup>14</sup> “From its inception, infant circumcision was the distinctive Israelite custom, not derived from Egyptian or other practice, and contrasting sharply with the puberty rites of other nations: the latter point to social acknowledgment of adult status, the former to a status before God and a prevenience of divine grace.” (Motyer; NBD) “Circumcision was a West Sem. practice performed at puberty as a rite of initiation for manhood and marriage (cf. Gen 34:15-16; Exod 4:25)... Thus a common cultural practice was invested with new religious meaning. It was also advanced to administration on the eighth day after birth.” (Allen; NIDOT)

(cf. Gen. 34:13-17).<sup>15</sup> So it's *this* approach to circumcision that Moses' *Midianite* wife would have been familiar with *in Midian*. Zipporah's point seems to be that Moses was already her bridegroom of blood once,<sup>16</sup> but now he is "*surely*"<sup>17</sup> her bridegroom of blood. At first, he was her bridegroom of blood because the shedding of *his* blood in circumcision was a sign that he was *of age to become her husband*. But now he is her bridegroom of blood because the shedding of *their son's* blood in circumcision is the sign that God will *allow his life to be spared so that he won't be taken away from her*.<sup>18</sup> One commentator says it like this: "[Zipporah] purchased [Moses'] life by the blood of her son; she received him back, as it were, from the dead, and married him anew." (Kurtz; quoted in Keil)<sup>19</sup>

So now let's put everything together that we have so far. At a lodging place on the way from Midian to Egypt, the LORD met [Moses] and sought to put him to death. We imagine the angel of the Lord standing over Moses with sword drawn, saying, "Because you have not circumcised your son, therefore you must die." Moses' wife, Zipporah, hearing the angel's words, takes a flint and cuts off her son's foreskin. And then, as a sign intended to turn away the Lord's wrath from her husband, she smeared the blood of the circumcision on [Moses'] feet. As she smeared the blood on Moses' feet, she said to him: "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me! Surely I have regained you as my husband only through the shedding of our son's blood in circumcision." And so we read in verse twenty-six:

**V. Exodus 4:26** — So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "What Zipporah says is the ritual statement which accompanied the premarital circumcision as a declaration to a young man's in-laws that he was of an age appropriate for marriage... Perhaps there was a similar ritual statement in the wedding ceremony." (Durham) I'm not sure on what basis Durham says this, whether it's educated conjecture or a historically verified fact.

<sup>16</sup> Whether or not Moses was circumcised in Midian prior to his wedding ceremony would seem to make little difference to this interpretation. The ultimate point is the Midianite custom and tradition with which Zipporah was familiar. Stuart (cf. Durham) gives reasons why he thinks it unlikely that Moses would have been circumcised by his biological parents. *IF* Stuart is right, then Moses would probably have been given the partial circumcision of the Egyptians by his Egyptian mother, and then been circumcised fully prior to his marriage in Midian.

<sup>17</sup> "Indeed" (NASB); "Truly" (NRSV)

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this double entendre is what caused Moses to clarify at the end: "It was then that she said, 'A bridegroom of blood,' because of the circumcision."

<sup>19</sup> "She means that she has, as it were, regained him as a husband by the blood of her child." (Mead, Lange translator) "[Zipporah] redeemed [Moses'] life by the loss of her child's blood." (Calvin) Motyer says something similar, though I think it's very possible that he over sentimentalizes the situation: "As Moses, now plainly better, opened his eyes and looked at his wife, she greeted him with a loving cry as though to say, 'Moses, you're back with me. You're my bridegroom and husband all over again. Instead of taking you from me, God has given you back to me because of the blood of circumcision. My bridegroom of blood.'" Stuart and Currid, of course, interpret this differently since they understand Zipporah and the firstborn Gershom to be the only human characters in this story. Stuart says (very dubiously in my opinion): "The expression 'relative of blood' is... an endearing reference to a husband's and wife's joining to become one flesh/blood and thus producing offspring that are their own flesh and blood so that Gershom was clearly Zipporah's 'blood relative.' ... Quite possibly Zipporah, in saying this, was not merely repeating words Midianites said at circumcisions but was using these words to link herself closely to Gershom; so her act on his behalf would suffice instead of Moses' actually doing Gershom's circumcision." Currid translates: "For a covenant-relative of blood you [Gershom] are to me." (But see note 12)

<sup>20</sup> Some who argue that Zipporah's resistance/revulsion was the reason Moses had failed to circumcize Eliezer point out the plural noun "circumcisions" and reason along these lines: "Zipporah seems to be surly about the whole train of circumcisions." (Lange) "The plural is used quite generally and indefinitely, as Zipporah referred not merely to

Who let whom alone? Of course, our assumption is that *the Lord* let *Moses* alone. Once the circumcision of her son was performed, and the blood of the circumcision touched to Moses' feet as a sign, the angel of the Lord backed off from Moses and spared his life. Perhaps we could even imagine the angel of the Lord returning His sword to its sheath.

And so after an exceedingly tense and terrifying ordeal, everything ends well. Moses' son is now circumcised as he should be, and Moses' life is spared. In the morning, Moses can get up and continue on his journey to Egypt to do what the Lord has called him to do.

Well, hopefully now we understand basically *what happened*, but now we also have to ask, “*Why* did it happen, and *why* was it included here in the book of Exodus?” Why did Moses write down this story for us to read today over three thousand years later?

### **Conclusion**

There's a whole lot about this story that probably seems strange to us. In fact, maybe the whole thing seems strange. But why is this? Why is it so foreign to our thinking? We might try to pass this off on “cultural differences,” or even on the fact that we are living today under the New Covenant rather than in the days of the Old Testament. But I don't think that's the real problem. I wonder if our “discomfort” is really just a subtle, but very important sign that we have not truly understood the holiness of God and therefore the absolute necessity of our obedience to Him. I wonder, too, if our “discomfort” is also a subtle, but very important sign that we have not understood how sacred and important are the physical signs and sacraments that God has given to us. When we come to this story in Exodus 4, the first thing we need to be reminded of is that it's not up to us to decide what is *reasonable* for God to say, or to do, or to be. *Instead*, we must have all of our thinking and all of our doing absolutely and completely *shaped* by what God reveals to us of Himself. Can you see that when we have done that, then no story about God's doings will ever again seem to us to be strange? Instead, we will always ask ourselves: “What is wrong here with *my* thinking? What does the apparent strangeness of this story reveal about how misguided *my own* thoughts and actions must be?” Listen to what the Lord said to Abraham in Genesis chapter seventeen:

- ✓ Genesis 17:10–14 — This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised... So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

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this one instance, but to [infant/child?] circumcision generally.” (Keil) However, as Hamilton points out, this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the noun “circumcision” appears. Motyer's comment is appropriate: “Since [the noun] occurs only here, we have no means of knowing if it was a noun customarily used in the plural (as e.g. ‘trousers’ in English) or if it was being used deliberately as a plural of intensification or greatness – ‘with reference to this notable circumcision’ (notable because it was the saving of Moses' life.”

God graciously gave to His people a physical, outward sign of their special covenant relationship to Him. The sign was a mark of His undeserved love and grace, and so also a testimony to their obligation to respond to God's love with absolute, whole-hearted obedience. It was not up to the people to say, I'll take the covenant relationship with God, but not the sign – *because the sign was given to them by the God of the covenant*. Remember: In the Bible, there is no relationship with God apart from covenant. In the Bible, there is no forgiveness of sins apart from covenant. In the Bible, there is no salvation of any kind apart from covenant. So it's impossible even to imagine neglecting the sign of the covenant given by God, and yet still claiming for ourselves the privilege of a right relationship with the God of the covenant. (cf. Matthews, NAC) In fact, from the very beginning God was explicitly clear: Any failure to circumcise or to *be* circumcised deserved the death penalty<sup>21</sup> (being "cut off" from the covenant people), because this was an overt, outward rejection of His love and grace (it was to break the covenant).<sup>22</sup>

Now, God has called Moses to be the *leader* of His *covenant people*! God has called Moses to *lead* His covenant people into a fuller experience of their covenant relationship with God at Mount Sinai. And yet *Moses* has failed to give one of his own sons the covenant sign of circumcision. Moses himself has treated lightly, and therefore with contempt, the holy and gracious, and merciful *God* of the covenant. Until now, God has spared Moses life. But having called Moses to this special task, Moses' failure becomes even more obvious, and even more inexcusable.<sup>23</sup> That Moses should actually set out for Egypt on the mission God has assigned him while his own son is still uncircumcised cannot possibly be an accidental oversight. Instead, it's a very clear sign that Moses still isn't taking God *seriously*.

God has come to Moses with reassurance, with comfort, with encouragement, and even made merciful provision for the weakness of his faith, but even after all that Moses still hasn't come to terms with who God *really* is, and with what God has really called him to do. So in His *mercy* and *grace*, the only thing left for God to do is to seek to put Moses to death. At first, we might not see any grace or mercy *here*. But notice that the text doesn't say, "The Lord met him and put him to death." How easy would that have been? Instead, we read, "The Lord met him and *sought* to put him to death."<sup>24</sup> Now God wasn't frustrated in His attempts, and this was by no means an empty threat. God was, indeed, seeking to put Moses to death, and God would certainly have succeeded in His purpose. Moses was absolutely already as good as dead. *And yet* God gave Moses time—precious seconds—allowing for the possibility that something might happen to turn away His judgment. And something *did* happen. Zipporah, probably not even knowing the full significance of all that she did and said, first of all circumcised her son – doing what Moses

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<sup>21</sup> Keil; Hamilton; contra, Matthews

<sup>22</sup> I agree with Keil here: "Although in this passage [Gen. 17:14] it is the uncircumcised themselves who are threatened with death, yet in the case of children the punishment fell upon the parents, and first of all upon the father, who had neglected to keep the commandment of God." (cf. Hamilton) We should remember, too, that when God prescribed the death penalty, He intended that it should be enforced *by the people* as the law of the land. But that didn't always happen; and when that was the case, God didn't *usually* step in to personally enforce it Himself. In the end, judgment would still come; and in the meantime the purity of the covenant people would be compromised and their blessings replaced with covenant curses. However, in *this* case, God *does* step in to "personally enforce the death penalty."

<sup>23</sup> Moses... had been guilty of a capital crime, which God could not pass over in the case of one whom He had chosen to be His messenger, to establish His covenant with Israel." (Keil) "He who is on his way to liberate the people of the circumcision, has in Midian even neglected to circumcise his... son." (Lange)

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Fretheim, quoted in Hamilton; Stuart.

*should* have done, but was now completely *unable* to do. But was that enough to turn away the Lord's judgment? *Not necessarily*. You see, the problem was not just that Moses' son was uncircumcised – there was a problem with Moses himself – there was a problem with Moses' *heart*. And so, still probably not realizing the full significance of what she was doing, Zipporah touched the blood of the circumcision to Moses' feet. It wasn't the circumcision alone that saved Moses' life, it was also the *blood* that was applied to his feet (cf. Lev. 17:11) – much like the blood of the Passover lamb that will soon be applied to the doorposts of the houses of Israel so that the Lord will “pass over” and spare the firstborn,<sup>25</sup> and ultimately like the blood of Jesus which is applied to us by faith so that we might be saved from the righteous wrath and judgment of God. With the circumcision completed, and the blood applied to Moses' feet, the text concludes very simply, “So [the Lord] let [Moses] alone.” Moses', who was truly as good as dead, was granted his life again.

And now, in His mercy and grace, God will use even this terrifying attack on Moses' life to continue the process of changing Moses into the man he has called him to be. Thus far, Moses has not yet learned to take God seriously – or at least as seriously as he *should* be taken. But when Moses gets up in the morning to continue his journey to Egypt, not only will his son be circumcised, but I think we can assume he'll be a significantly different man than he was the day before.<sup>26</sup> In fact, I believe it's at this point that Moses probably sends his family back home to Midian<sup>27</sup> (cf. Exod. 18:1-9) Moses has been terribly shaken – much like David was when the Lord struck down Uzzah for his irreverence in handling the ark. (cf. 2 Sam. 6:6-8) But Moses needed to be shaken. Moses *must* learn to take God *seriously*. And God is never more merciful and gracious to us than when He is teaching us to take Him as seriously as He should be – so that we understand the absolute necessity of unqualified, unreserved, wholehearted obedience to the one who has chosen us to live in covenant relationship with Him.

As we said a moment ago, in His holy *mercy* and *grace*, the only thing left for God to do was to very truly and literally seek to put Moses to death.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes *we* desperately *need* to be shaken in order that we might learn to take God seriously,<sup>29</sup> in order that we might learn, as one commentator says, that “The Lord treats obedience with a seriousness that is in marked contrast to our casual and self-excusing ways.” (Motyer) Even as what happened in this story was intended to shake Moses, I wonder if God might *mercifully* and *graciously* use this same story to

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Currid; Hamilton

<sup>26</sup> Childs sees a very different purpose for this story. He writes: “If one looks at the story as a whole in its present form, it serves to dramatize the tremendous importance of circumcision.” Of course, Childs cannot see any point to the story as an actual historical event in chronological sequence because he supposes that a redactor has placed this story here for purely theological reasons. This account does emphasize the importance of circumcision, and it would have assuredly communicated this point to Israel, but I don't believe this was the main point. Enns appears to fall into the same trap as Childs when he restricts the story to being a sign of God's zeal for circumcision. (“What we see in 4:24-26 is the zeal with which the Lord guards this most important rite [of circumcision].”)

<sup>27</sup> The next time Moses' wife and sons are mentioned is in Exodus 18:1-9 when they come from Midian with Moses' father-in-law to meet Moses at Sinai. (Cf. Stuart; Lange; Keil) Lange and Keil assume that Moses sends his wife home because of her resistance to God's will and ways. But *if*, in fact, Moses does send her back at this time (as I think is very likely), I would suggest that he sends her home because he has finally been awakened to the true seriousness of his task.

<sup>28</sup> “[This] divine assault was really an exceedingly kind work of grace.” (Motyer)

<sup>29</sup> “[God] threatened [Moses] with death, to bring him to a consciousness of his sin... and [in order] to show him with what earnestness God demanded the keeping of His commandments.” (Keil)



shake us today – to wake us up again to the uncompromising holiness and sovereignty of the one who has called us His sons and daughters. And even as Moses life was spared only by the circumcision of his son and by the touching of the blood to his feet, so may we also remember that we are spared the righteous judgments of God only because of the spilled blood of His Son, applied to us through faith in Him.