Why was God going to kill Moses in Exodus 4?

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Exodus 4:24–26 is one of the strangest and most abrupt passages in the entire Old Testament. On the surface, it appears that God commissions Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt and then suddenly attempts to kill him on the journey back to Egypt. The reason becomes clear, however, when we recognize that Moses had apparently failed to circumcise his son according to God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:9–14).

The passage highlights a crucial biblical principle: those whom God appoints to lead His people are not exempt from obedience to Him. Moses was being sent to confront Pharaoh about covenant faithfulness while neglecting a covenant obligation within his own household. Exodus 4 reminds us that God takes holiness and covenant obedience seriously—especially among those called to spiritual leadership.

The passage reads:

> "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 touched Moses' feet with it and said, 'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!' So he let him alone." (Exod. 4:24–26)

The immediate challenge is that the text is unusually compressed and leaves several details unstated. The Hebrew grammar is somewhat ambiguous, especially regarding whom God intended to strike and whose "feet" Zipporah touched. Most interpreters conclude the threat was directed toward Moses himself because he was the covenant head of the household and responsible for the neglect.

To understand the severity of the situation, we have to go back to Genesis 17. Circumcision was not merely a cultural custom for Israel; it was the covenant sign God gave to Abraham and his descendants. There, Yahweh declared:

> “Any uncircumcised male… shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Gen. 17:14)

That language matters. Moses—the very man chosen to mediate God’s covenant to Israel—was apparently disregarding the covenant sign within his own family. The issue was not merely medical or ethnic. It was theological.

Why had Moses neglected circumcision? The text does not explicitly say. Many scholars suspect the issue may have involved his Midianite wife, Zipporah. Her reaction in Exodus 4 suggests resentment or discomfort surrounding circumcision. When she says, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,” the phrase carries frustration and revulsion. Some scholars think Moses may have delayed circumcising his son to preserve peace within the family.

If so, the irony is striking. Moses had spent forty years in Midian after fleeing Egypt (Acts 7:29–30), and during that time he appears to have become spiritually compromised in at least this area of covenant obedience. Yet now God was sending him to stand before Pharaoh as the covenant representative of Yahweh.

This helps explain the sudden severity of the encounter. God was not arbitrarily angry. Rather, Moses himself was out of alignment with the covenant he was being commissioned to proclaim.

Theologically, this event fits a larger biblical pattern. Scripture repeatedly teaches that proximity to holy things increases accountability, not decreases it. Nadab and Abihu were judged for unauthorized worship (Lev. 10:1–3). Uzzah was struck for touching the ark improperly (2 Sam. 6:6–7). Ananias and Sapphira faced judgment for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1–11). Moses himself would later be barred from entering the Promised Land because he dishonored God before the people (Num. 20:10–12).

Leadership before God is a weighty thing.

At the same time, Exodus 4 also contains an important theme of mercy. Once circumcision was performed, the threat passed: “So he let him alone” (Exod. 4:26). God was not seeking Moses’ destruction for its own sake. The judgment functioned as a covenant correction that brought Moses back into obedience.

Christians should also recognize that circumcision ultimately pointed beyond itself. The New Testament teaches that physical circumcision was part of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant framework fulfilled in Christ (Rom. 2:28–29; Gal. 5:6; Col. 2:11–12). Under the new covenant, what

God ultimately seeks is not merely an outward sign but a transformed heart—a “circumcision of the heart” by the Spirit (Deut. 10:16; Rom. 2:29).

Key Scriptures to Study

- Exodus 4:24–26 — God confronts Moses over covenant neglect.
- Genesis 17:9–14 — Circumcision established as the covenant sign given to Abraham.
- Exodus 6:2–8 — God formally identifies Himself as the covenant-keeping Yahweh.
- Joshua 5:2–9 — Circumcision restored before Israel enters the Promised Land.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: “Why would God react so harshly over circumcision?”

Because circumcision was not merely a ritual. It was the covenant sign explicitly commanded by God to Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 17:10–14). Moses’ neglect represented covenant disobedience at the very moment he was being commissioned as Israel’s covenant mediator.

Common Objection: “Was God actually trying to kill Moses?”

The text certainly presents a genuine divine threat. Some interpreters suggest severe illness rather than immediate execution, but the passage intentionally communicates the seriousness of the situation. Whatever happened, Zipporah clearly understood circumcision was the issue.

Common Objection: “Does this mean Christians today are required to circumcise their children?”

No. The New Testament repeatedly teaches that physical circumcision is not required under the new covenant (Gal. 5:2–6; Acts 15:1–29). Circumcision belonged to the covenant structure given to Abraham and Israel and pointed forward to deeper spiritual realities fulfilled in Christ.

Why This Matters

Exodus 4:24–26 reminds us that God’s holiness is not sentimentalized in Scripture. He is gracious and merciful, but He is also serious about covenant faithfulness—especially among those called to spiritual leadership.

The passage also guards us from hypocrisy. Moses could not faithfully confront Pharaoh while ignoring God’s commands in his own household. Scripture consistently teaches that obedience begins close to home.

Finally, this passage ultimately points us to Christ. Moses, the covenant mediator, failed and required correction. Jesus, the greater Mediator of the new covenant, obeyed the Father perfectly in every respect (Heb. 3:1–6; Phil. 2:8). Where Moses faltered, Christ succeeded completely on behalf of His people.

Recommended Resources

- Exodus for You (Tim Chester) — Readable commentary balancing theology and application.
- Exodus (Douglas K. Stuart) — Strong evangelical commentary with attention to Hebrew background.
- The Book of Exodus (Brevard S. Childs) — Major scholarly commentary with theological depth.