

Zipporah and the Bridegroom of Blood

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Date: 04 June 2024

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[0 : 00] Greetings and salutations.

Welcome, welcome, welcome to the Providence Podcast. My name is Chris Oswald, Senior Pastor at Providence Community Church. We are going to dabble in Exodus chapter 4 today.

That's where we will be headed this Sunday for the upcoming sermon on June 9th. I believe it is. Exodus chapter 4. And there's a particular part of Exodus chapter 4 that I really don't want to slow down to talk about during the sermon.

So I thought, well, let's go ahead and hit it right now via a podcast. Now, if you'll remember, Exodus chapter 3, we looked at it last week.

We looked at it the week before. It's the commissioning of Moses. And we saw an interplay between God and Moses. Moses bringing up five distinct objections that all have something to do with his insufficiency and the difficulty of the task.

[1 : 12] And then God bringing five answers, all of which have to do with his promise to be with Moses and to bless his efforts and so on and so forth. The conversation ends when God tells Moses he won't have to do it alone.

He will go back to Egypt and find Aaron, his brother, waiting for him. Aaron is, the text says, a good talker. And so Aaron will be glad to see Moses.

And when he sees Moses, he will join the team. And together they will go to Pharaoh's household and communicate the message that God has for them.

Now, we're going to talk about this particular moment in Exodus chapter 4. And the heading probably in your Bible would be something like the bridegroom of blood or something like that.

Now, this is a two-verse story that takes place after Moses leaves the house of Jethro, his father-in-law, along with his wife and his two grown sons.

[2 : 20] We would assume they're grown just based on how long Moses had been married to Zipporah, his wife. And that was 40 years.

And just, you know, Moses is 80 years old at this point. So we're assuming that piece of it. But I think, you know, for good reason. And so we're going to talk about this little tiny story, takes place in two verses, that you might call Zipporah, circumcision, and the bridegroom of blood.

Now, before I get into this, I'm going to tell you that I will manfully resist any jokes related to zippers and circumcision. That's my promise to you in this podcast.

I will not go there. All right, let me get into this story. Let's start by reading verse 18. This is sort of after Moses has agreed to go and do what God has called him to do.

It says then that Moses went back. This is verse 18 of chapter 4. Moses went back to Jethro, his father-in-law, and said to him, Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive.

[3 : 31] And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace. Let me pause there and suggest to you that already we're seeing that Moses is not quite still yet convinced. He is not communicating as far as we can see to Jethro that he had encountered God in the burning bush.

He's not discussing his particular mission. He simply says, Let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive.

So I think he's probably hedging his bets a bit. We might talk about that a bit more on Sunday. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace. And the Lord said to Moses in Midian, Go back to Egypt.

For all the men who were seeking your life are dead. All the men who were seeking your life are dead. So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt.

And Moses took the staff of God in his hand. And the staff was just Moses' staff. But now it's become the staff of God. Moses took the staff of God in his hand.

[4 : 38] And the Lord said to Moses, When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn. And I say to you, Let my son go that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn sons. That's Exodus 4, 18-23. Now in verse 24, we come to the strange part. Now, that's a very strange passage.

Dr. Michael Heiser wrote a book called I Dare You Not to Bore Me with the Bible. And it's a book largely comprised of what Heiser says are weird but important Bible stories.

And he includes this story in that book. Heiser writes that Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 4, 24-26 is arguably one of the strangest and most confusing events recorded in the Bible.

[6 : 05] Then he goes on to offer a brief explanation of the text, a brief interpretation of the events in those two verses. But I do not agree with his interpretation, mostly because I think he makes too many assumptions.

The best treatment of the text that I have seen comes from James B. Jordan. He wrote an entire appendix to this, on this topic in one of his books.

And I like his treatment for two reasons. Firstly, Jordan works through all of the historical interpretations of this passage. He's very thorough in his interaction with a pretty broad range of expositors.

And secondly, I think he does the best job in keeping this passage connected to the context. So I like Jordan here for two reasons. One, he takes the time and works through all of the other possible options presented over the years through various interpretations.

And then I also like Jordan the best here because I think he does a good job keeping this passage connected to the context. Now, let's talk about what this story might actually mean.

[7 : 16] And the first, there's some details you need to know to understand why I think the interpretation I believe is right.

And also, I think it'll also kind of explain why other people land in different places. First thing I think you need to know is that in the Hebrew, so in the original language, and I did double check, by the way, this morning, in the Hebrew, in the original language, the name Moses never appears in these verses.

So in the ESV and in the NASB and in the King James, they all read something like this. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet.

But when you go to the original language, you do not see the name of Moses there. Moses is added by the English translators. And the literal would simply say this.

Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched his feet. So we need to know that Moses doesn't actually appear in the passage.

[8 : 27] Secondly, you need to know that the context of the passage, which I did read to you, has to do with firstborn sons. The last thing we see before we get to this weird story is in verse 22-23, where God says, Thus you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, Let my son go that he may serve me.

If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son. And indeed, that's exactly what happens in the Passover. And I think it's also important to remember that the reason that the Hebrews had to apply blood to the lamb, to the blood of the lamb to their doorposts, was so that the angel of death would pass over their households and not kill the Hebrews' sons.

So as we're trying to make sense of this story with Zipporah and circumcision and the bridegroom of blood, let's understand that what's going on here in a broader contextual sense is a discussion of God's judgment on some firstborn sons and God's love for other firstborn sons.

He says, Israel is my firstborn son. And then he says to Pharaoh, If you don't let them go, I'm going to take your firstborn sons. So now let me tell you how I'm handling this passage.

For some reason, almost certainly related to Moses' own neglect, Gershom, who is Moses' firstborn son, had not been circumcised.

[10 : 07] Moses would have known about circumcision, and Moses would have known that it's required, but also remember that a lot of time has passed since Abraham, since circumcision was

instituted.

A lot of time has passed, and maybe these details have gotten fuzzy in their minds. I don't know. I don't know whether that's true or not. But Gershom, Moses' firstborn son, should have been circumcised.

It appears that he was not. Firstborn sons represented their fathers before God. They were kind of like princes. They were the future of the family and sort of bore the name and future legacy of their fathers.

So the first question is, who is it that God was about to kill? And you've got two options. You've got that God was about to kill Moses or that God was about to kill Gershom.

Now remember, as I have mentioned earlier, we believe that Gershom was probably, you know, an adult male at this point. Now the text is not clear. And also maybe we should add, the distinction isn't as big as we think it might be between Moses and his firstborn son.

[11:25] To kill a firstborn son is nearly the same thing as killing the father. So one of the questions we have to ask is, did Zipporah save Gershom's life or Moses' life?

Let me read the text to you again. And I'll read it to you, you know, with a loose Chris translation of the original.

At the 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 his feet with it 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. All right. So is God about to kill Moses or about to kill Zipporah?

Or about to kill Gershom? We know that Gershom was the one circumcised, but was the foreskin then touched to his feet or was the foreskin then touched to Moses' feet?

[12:36] These are the kinds of questions that we need to figure out. My sense is, is that this is really a story about Zipporah saving Gershom's life.

Here's, here's some thoughts for why I believe that to be the case. First of all, I think it would seem kind of odd that God would so patiently walk with Moses through all of his objections and be so clear in the promise that he would use Moses and so on and so forth.

That's all in, you know, chapter three and the beginning of chapter four. I think it would be a little odd that now we've got God about to kill Moses. I think that makes God sound a bit arbitrary and capricious and I don't think God is arbitrary and capricious.

So I would think that the text is not suggesting that God was about to kill Moses. Again, the text doesn't really tell us. It just tells us he was about to kill someone.

I don't think that's right. I think that that would make God arbitrary and capricious. I think it stands in kind of opposition to God's general posture toward Moses, even in delivering him initially from Pharaoh, delivering him a second time from Pharaoh after he murdered the Egyptian and then spending most, well, all of chapter three and a good part of chapter four being patient with Moses and, you know, working through his unbelief.

[14:09] So I don't think that's the case. I suppose you might suggest that God wasn't really going to kill him. He just acted like he was going to kill him. But then I think you're doing damage to the text in another way.

After all, the text explicitly says the Lord sought to put him to death. Maybe Moses is the object, but since it isn't clear, I think we find Gershom as the one who is in danger to be the more likely target. This definitely fits with the broader context concerning God killing the firstborn sons of Egypt. I think this is also a sound idea because, well, I'll get into that in a minute.

Let me just keep going here. Before I get into that, let me go into the story a little bit further.

Because one of the things I think is worth asking, this is what I asked after reading Jordan's review of all of the different views, is why doesn't everybody see it that way?

Why doesn't everybody interpret this as God stooping to kill Gershom and not Moses? Well, firstly, as I mentioned in a moment ago, if they're only looking at the English, it's going to show up as Moses.

[15:28] There's only one translation that I found, it's a relatively new one, that translates this without the name Moses. Almost all of the translations insert the name Moses into the story, even though it doesn't appear in the original.

But I think that the other reason why most people think it's Moses and not Gershom, that is the intended object of God's ire, is that after Zipporah does this, she circumcises Gershom, she touches somebody's feet with the foreskin, and after she does this, she says, surely you are a bridegroom to me.

And since Moses is Zipporah's husband, well, that makes people think that, you know, it's Moses who is being saved. Well, the thing is, is that the phrase bridegroom is not the same as husband. Those are different terms in the original. And the word bridegroom is very often translated son-in-law. It's really more of a legal kinship, a legal relationship, not necessarily one by blood per se, not a relation per se.

So I think that Zipporah and Moses are both part of the formal covenant of God's people, but Gershom was not. He had not taken the initiation rite, even though it was appropriate for him to do so.

[17:01] Remember, Moses is 80 years old. Gershom is probably an adult. And so essentially what we have here is the prince of the household who most likely due to the parents' neglect has never been circumcised.

So I think what's going on here is Zipporah marries Gershom to God's covenant people. You have to remember, and I'll get into this a little bit more, that Zipporah is not a Hebrew.

She's a Midianite. And we'll get into what the Midianites were in a minute, but I think of them essentially as feral Hebrews. They were children of one of Abraham's other marriages.

And so what I think is going on here is this circumcision is essentially putting Gershom into the Hebrew race and taking him out of the Midianite race. That's my best guess.

Now, how certain am I of this? Well, gosh, I mean, this is a pretty tough passage. And I think if anything, at this point in the conversation, it might be worth noting, like, well, how do you handle a really difficult passage?

[18:07] Well, one, obviously, you look at the context. Two, you know, you try to do the least amount of damage to some of the text. Sometimes it feels like to interpret a passage, you wind up taking something there and saying it doesn't mean quite what it appears to mean.

In this case, I would be doing that with this phrase, bridegroom of blood. Though, as I said a moment ago, bridegroom doesn't even mean husband. It's translated about half the time bridegroom and about half the time son-in-law.

So that's my best take. My best take is something like this. God sees Gershom headed into Goshen, headed into the people of God.

He accounts Moses as being in the covenant and he accounts Zipporah as being in the covenant, but he doesn't account Gershom because Gershom hasn't been properly circumcised.

And so he is going to make an example of Gershom as you don't get to just prance into God's people when you're not one of God's people.

[19:23] And so I think Zipporah circumcises him and saves his life. And I think that when it says, now this is, again, this is pretty speculative, but when it says that she touched his legs or his feet with the foreskin, I think actually what we're doing there is we're just painting the doorposts with blood where she's marking him out as one of God's own people.

Now, the question becomes, well, why is this story even in chapter four? You can tell by the way that it's described that even to the original audience, there had to be some explanation of this phrase, bridegroom of blood.

There must have been some contemporaneous use of that phrase. You know, there's this second half of all the action really takes place in one verse and for the most part, and then, you know, the second verse is this idea of Zipporah saying, this is when she called him the bridegroom of blood.

So I don't think that Zipporah is saying, I have married my son. I think what she's saying is that now we are related through the blood of the covenant. And you are now inserted into a son-in-law of, if you will, not by natural birth, but by legal covenantal birth, you are now part of God's people.

So why is this story in chapter four? Well, let me see if I can explain my thoughts there by using an example from fiction. Think of the fellowship of the ring.

[21:01] One key purpose of that book is to show us the formation of the team, right? The team is being assembled. Now, Frodo might be the star, but he has a very sizable supporting cast.

There's Samwise, of course, but also Gandalf and Aragorn and Legolas and Gimli and Peregrine Took and Merry and Boromir. The ring in the first book is a long way from being destroyed, but what

we're doing in the first book is we're getting the team together, the fellowship that will be working together to bring that important event to pass.

I think what Exodus 4, 18 through 31, is doing, second half of Exodus 4, I think what's going on there is we're seeing the team assembled. It serves the same purpose as we see in the fellowship of the ring.

It's assembling the Avengers, if you will. The Exodus itself is still a long way off. Entry into the promised land is even further off, but the key players have been assembled.

And the thing about, you know, the Fellowship of the Ring or an Avengers movie or something is, is that each one of the team members has their own backstory. Moses is the star, so we get the most information about his backstory and his journey.

[22 : 23] Aaron is kind of the second lead in the story, and so we get some information about some more details about his involvement. God went to Aaron in Goshen and told him, you know, meet your brother out into the desert and so on and so forth.

But we also have these other players. We have Jethro and Zipporah and Gershon, and we're given a little bit of information about how they come into covenant with God as well.

So I thought just for funsies, we'd go through, you know, some of the, some of these players and just kind of introduce the team in this podcast. These are some of the more influential people in Moses's life.

We talked on Sunday about, you know, not having to do evangelism alone, not having to do the mission that God's called us to alone. And we see that happening in chapter four.

There's an assembly of the team. I'd say that's the other main theme in that passage is the assembling of the team. The second one would be, you know, this firstborn idea. So let's go through, let's go through the team.

[23 : 30] First of all, you've got Jethro. And I suppose the first thing you need to know about Jethro was that he was a Midianite. As I said before, Midianites were descendants of Abraham. They came from his marriage to Keturah.

They had a son named Midian. Now the Midianites were never considered formally a part of God's covenant people. But I tend to think of them as kind of like feral Hebrews.

You know, they were still worshiping Yahweh. You say, well, how do we know that? Well, the other thing we know about Jethro is that he was a priest. We see that in chapter two and it's repeated again in chapter 18, coming off the heels of the Red Sea deliverance and I believe also the manna provision.

Jethro joins Moses and praises Yahweh and offers sacrifices with Moses to Yahweh. And this, by the way, is the same passage where Jethro advises Moses to delegate some of his authority to the elders.

I suppose this is the thing that Jethro is best known for. So I went ahead and grabbed that passage like I'd read it to you just so you'd bear in mind like, well, what kind of man is Jethro?

[24 : 41] Well, in Exodus 18, you get this image of a good father-in-law, a wise father-in-law. We saw that a little bit in chapter two. He expressed concern for his daughters.

He welcomed Moses into his family. He gave Moses a job. He gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. But in 18, verse 18, Exodus 18, 18, we see the thing I think Jethro is most known for.

He's watching Moses do, go about his work. He's watching the concerns of this large number of people. And he says to Moses, what are you doing? And Moses says, well, I'm about to hear the story, you know, the cases, if you will.

And this is what Jethro says to Moses, you and the people will certainly wear yourselves out for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. Now obey my voice. I will give you advice and God be with you.

You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God and you shall warn them about the statutes and laws and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do.

[25 : 47] Moreover, look for men, for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands of hundreds of fifties and tens and let them judge the people at all times.

Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide among themselves. So it will be easier for you and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God

will direct you and you will be able to endure and all this people will also go to their place in peace. So that's what Jethro is probably best known for. I think overall he's a pretty good guy. He was kind to Moses at repeated instances. He was a priest, I think kind of a feral priest, probably didn't have a lot of the formal requirements, not that there were a lot at this stage, but probably, you know, probably had some inconsistencies in his worship.

But he was, I suppose, in some ways the Midianites, you know, they were sort of like the Samaritans. They did worship Yahweh, but not as cleanly as they ought. Okay, so that's Jethro. Now from Jethro we can move on to Moses' wife, Zipporah. We first encounter her, of course, in Exodus 2. She, along with her six sisters, were shepherdesses.

[27 : 07] And as Moses is fleeing Pharaoh, he encounters these gals being harassed by some men at the local watering hole. The text tells us Moses chased them away and watered their sheep for them.

Moses and Zipporah are married and they have two sons. And we're moving into the sons. Moses names the first son Gershom, which means I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.

And he names the second son Eliezer, which means the God of my father was my help. Now, as I mentioned before, Gershom seems to be the star in these two verses in Exodus 4.

That's my sense anyway. And it seems to be just a way of God talking about how these kids, these Midianite, half Midianite, half Hebrew kids get fully, you know, included in the covenant people of God.

That's Zipporah, that's Gershom, that's Eliezer. Okay, now we move on to Aaron. And unlike, you know, the other characters that we've discussed, Aaron figures heavily into the Exodus story.

[28 : 17] What should we say about Aaron? Well, I think one thing I'd like you to remember is that he, along with Moses, was a Levite. Why is that significant? Well, gosh, there's a couple things I'd like to say about this.

One is, is that, you know, you've heard the phrase prophet, priest, and king. And what might surprise you to learn that, as far as I know, and I believe I've read this from multiple sources, John Calvin was actually the first to identify these three roles and attribute them to Christ.

And so, you know, we see those three roles, of course, throughout the Old Testament. We see the prophet, the priest, and the king. But, you know, Calvin, I believe, was the first to talk about the threefold office of Jesus Christ, that he serves in all three functions.

And, you know, when you look at Jesus in that sense, you go backward into the Old Testament and you start looking around for other figures that sort of occupied all three offices at the same time.

I think David fits into that category to some extent. And I think Moses does too. Moses, I think, fits into those three categories. Definitely a prophet and definitely a king.

[29 : 29] And I guess by fact of his Levitical birth, he would also be considered a priest to some extent. But the thing I was really meaning to tell you about the Levites is that you gotta remember something about the Levites.

When Jacob, now we're back in Genesis, when Jacob is about to die, he issues prophecies over all of his sons. I think the text says blessings, but in the Old Testament, you know, the blessings were really just prophecies.

They were predictions, not necessarily positive things, but just predictions of this is how your life is going to go. So let me read to you what Jacob prophesied over Levi.

And I'm reading this from Genesis 49, verses 5 through 7. Simeon and Levi are brothers. Weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their counsel.

O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel.

[30 : 42] I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel. So Jacob's prophecy over the Levitical line was that they were going to be violent men.

And I think that's important to understand. Firstly, it tells you something about Moses' own temper and his own journey into meekness, which we discussed a few weeks ago. But also because it's easy to overlook the fact that the priests, the Levites, were, you know, really kind of God's avengers.

There's a story in Exodus 32 that encapsulates this. Moses is descending the mountain and finds the people in a Dionysian, you know, orgastic carnality, you know, involving the golden calf.

And listen to how this goes. This is Exodus 32, 25. And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose, for Aaron had let them break loose to the derision of their enemies, then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, who is on the Lord's side, come to me.

And all the sons of Levi gathered around him and he said to them, thus says the Lord God of Israel, put your sword on your side, each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp and each of you kill his brother and companion and his neighbor.

[32 : 04] And the sons of Levi did, according to the word of Moses, and that day about 3,000 men of the people fell. And Moses said, today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord, each one of you at the cost of his son and his brother so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.

So, thing to know, we're talking about Aaron, we're saying he's a Levite. The thing to know is that the Levites were some of the fiercest men in the nation. And then, of course, speaking of Aaron, we also know because we were told in chapter 4 that Aaron is well-spoken and we see at the end of chapter 4 that he hears from God on his own.

He has his own kind of burning bush experience. He's told to join Moses in the desert. They meet at Sinai, the mountain of the Lord, and there they walk into Egypt together with Aaron being the mouthpiece of Moses, not only here but other times throughout the passage and more than just the mouthpiece.

Aaron just becomes Moses' right-hand man. So that's some of the main characters who are assembled together with Moses in chapter 4. And I think that that strange circumcision story is in some respects just a way of describing how Moses' own family were brought onto the team officially.

And that's the main takeaway. I think we just want to keep hammering this home. Remember that God isn't calling us to do any of this alone. Not only will he be with us but he will be with us by being with other people and bringing those people alongside of us.

[33 : 44] Remember the word fellowship means partaking. And not only are we all partaking in Christ together but we're also called to partake of Christ's mission together.

His mission to seek and save the lost. And it's a sweet thing and a thing to celebrate to see that we've got a partnership with our brothers and sisters and that this is a gift of God that encourages us and helps us as we seek to fulfill God's mission together.

It brings us joy. I'll leave you with something Paul says to the Philippians related to this in chapter 1 verses 3 through 4. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

So when Paul thought of the Philippians he thought of them as partners and this partnership brought him joy. Okay well I really wanted to touch on that because I don't really think that a Sunday morning sermon is the best time to talk about Zipporah.

Circumcision and the Bridegroom of Blood there are some passages that I think are better taught than preached and there are some passages I think that are better preached than taught so that's why I'm doing this and hopefully at least now when you look at that passage you'll think well Chris didn't skip it exactly.

[35 : 14] I kind of did but I kind of didn't. That's my take on the passage. Love to hear if you have any thoughts or insights on it and overall I'm just grateful for you and for our partnership in the gospel together.

All right God bless you have a great day.