

Romans 5:6

Helpless to Save Ourselves

Romans 5:6 tells that man is “*helpless*” to save himself:

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (Romans 5:6)

Ephesians 2:8-9, Titus 3:5, and Romans 3:20 confirm that no matter how hard man labors, he can never perform sufficient deeds to merit God’s favor. Many people, however, attempt to gain salvation through their own effort. If man will but realize his ungodliness (which he is capable of doing while depraved), repent (turn from sin), and exercise faith, God will save him.

Some theologians emphasize the word “*helpless*” (Romans 5:6) and teach a spiritual deadness that prevents the depraved from exercising personal repentance and faith. They argue that God must spiritually regenerate the depraved, give them repentance and faith, before they can repent, believe, and be saved. In their opinion, the depraved (spiritually unregenerated) are nothing more than corpses, totally incapable of understanding truth prior to God’s spiritual enlightenment. Adam disproves this error, for immediately after sinning and becoming depraved he realized his spiritual nakedness (Genesis 3:7, 10). Also consider that God gave the Law to convict the depraved of sin (Galatians 3:24; 1Timothy 1:9-10) so they might repent and believe. Such a Law would be useless should the depraved (spiritually unregenerated) lack the capability of recognizing their need for a Savior.

Have you wondered why so few people choose to repent and come to Christ? John communicates it best in John 3:19-21, where he states that “...*men loved the darkness rather than the light...*,” as evidenced by the fact that “...*their deeds were evil.*” He then states that “...*everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.*” In other words, many people refuse to turn from sin due to fearing the Lord will expose their error. If man refuses to perceive himself as sinful (ungodly) and, therefore, fails to repent while depraved, he simply cannot become God’s child. Paul spent much time proving this truth in Romans 1-3.

Jesus Died at the Right Time

Read Romans 5:6, paying special attention to the phrase “...*at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*” What a powerful statement for Paul to make at this point in his epistle! Could it be that God appointed a specific time in history, even to the very day and hour, for Jesus to die—all along granting man a free will to choose as he pleases? The answer is “yes!” After all, Jesus was crucified at 9:00 a.m. on Passover morning (30 AD), at the exact time the Passover Chagigah sacrifice was being offered in the temple.

The Jews deal with the days of the week differently than the days of the month. They consider the day of the week as beginning at sundown and ending the following sundown. However, they regard the day of the month as beginning at midnight and continuing until the following midnight. This fact is confirmed in Leviticus 23:26-32, where verse 27 points out that the Day of Atonement was to be observed on “*the tenth*

day of” the “seventh month.” However, verse 32 indicates that it began on the “evening” before, the “evening” of “the ninth of the month.” Thus, even though the Jewish day of the week changed when three stars appeared in the evening, the day of the month did not change until midnight.

This same principle applies to the Passover addressed in Leviticus 23:5-6. The lamb was killed and eaten at “twilight” (when three stars appeared) on the evening of the “fourteenth” (v.5), but the Feast of Unleavened Bread did not begin until the next calendar day, the “fifteenth” of the month (v.6). This fact allows us to better understand the events surrounding the Passover in Jesus’ day. The lamb for Jesus’ last Passover with His disciples was killed on Thursday afternoon, the fourteenth of Nisan, and eaten at evening (when three stars appeared), the beginning of Jewish Friday but the same calendar day, the fourteenth. However, the special Passover sacrifice offered at 9:00 a.m. the next morning, the Chagigah sacrifice, was offered on Friday, the same day of the week, but a different calendar day, the fifteenth.

The Jews who delivered Jesus to Pilate “...did not enter into the Praetorium in order that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover” (John 18:28). This statement has caused some individuals to misinterpret the context, for they view the word “Passover” as pointing to the Pascal Supper eaten on Thursday evening, the beginning of Jewish Friday. The truth of the matter is that the word “Passover” in Scripture can point to the Pascal Supper (eaten on Thursday evening) as well as the Chagigah sacrifice offered on Friday morning—in fact, all the Passover sacrifices. Jesus ate the Pascal Supper with His disciples on Thursday evening, the beginning of Jewish Friday. However, substantial proof exists confirming that the word “Passover” (John 18:28) points to the special Chagigah Passover sacrifice offered at 9:00 a.m. on Friday morning. The Chagigah is addressed in the Old Testament, for instance, in Deuteronomy 16:2-3. The following (somewhat technical) quote comes from *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, (John Lightfoot):

That therefore which John saith, that “the Jews would not go into the judgment hall lest they should be polluted, but that they might eat the Passover,” is to be understood of that Chagigah of the fifteenth day, not of the paschal lamb: for that also is called the Passover, Deuteronomy 16:2; “Thou shalt sacrifice the Passover to the Lord of thy flocks and of thy herds.” “Of thy flocks; this indeed, by virtue of that precept, Exodus 12:3: but what have we to do with herds?” “Of thy herds,’ saith R. Solomon, for the Chagigah.”

...So that John said nothing strange to the ears of the Jews, when he said, “They went not into the judgment hall lest they might be polluted, but that they might eat the Passover”; pointing with his finger to the Chagigah, and not to the lamb, eaten indeed the day before.¹

The defilement mentioned in John 18:28 was produced through contact with a Gentile (read Acts 10:28 as well as the following quote from the Mishnah).

If a man went through the country of the gentiles in hilly or rocky country, he becomes unclean...The dwelling places of gentiles are unclean. (*Mishnah—Oholoth, 18:7—p. 675*):

Any person who had contracted Levitical defilement could not offer the Chagigah, to which the following quote refers as “festal offering”:

But when it is offered on a Sabbath, or is sufficient, or [is offered] in uncleanness, none may bring a [freewill] festal offering. (*Mishnah—Pesahim, 6: 3—p. 144*)

This defilement continued until sundown (Leviticus 22:4-7). Therefore, had the Jews entered the Praetorium early Friday morning, to observe the Chagigah sacrifice later that same morning would have been impossible (the Chagigah could not be offered on behalf of a defiled person). Entering the Praetorium would have been of no concern had the Pascal Supper been the issue, for that defilement would have ceased at sundown (Leviticus 22:4-7), freeing them to partake of the meal. The only way John 18:28 can be reconciled with Matthew, Mark, and Luke is for the word “*Passover*” to point to the Chagigah sacrifice of Friday morning rather than the Pascal Supper of Thursday evening, the beginning of Jewish Friday.

Pilate’s dilemma was that had he released a man claiming to be king of the Jews, he would have been viewed as having released a rival to Caesar. Such a scenario could have cost Pilate more than his governorship. It might very well have cost him his life. This political pressure caused Pilate to bring Jesus out, place himself on the judgment seat (John 19:13) and say to the Jews, “...*Behold, your King*” (John 19:14). This event occurred at “*about the sixth hour*” on “*the day of preparation for the Passover*” (v.14), “*the...preparation for the Passover*” (v.14) pointing to the Chagigah Passover sacrifice offered later that Friday morning. The following quote is from *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, (John Lightfoot):

“It was the preparation of the Passover, and about the sixth hour.” It was the preparation to the Chagigah, and not to the lamb.ⁱⁱ

It seems proper, therefore, for the word “*Passover*” (John 19:14) to point to the Chagigah sacrifice offered on Friday morning—not to the paschal lamb eaten on Thursday evening. “*About the sixth hour*” (John 19:14) is based on the Roman perception of time, which was 6:00 a.m. in the morning. The time of the crucifixion is placed at “*the third hour*” (Mark 15:25), which according to the Jewish frame of reference, was 9:00 a.m. Thus, Jesus was crucified at the same time the official Passover sacrifice (the Chagigah sacrifice) was being offered in the temple on Friday morning.

Jesus died “...*at the right time*...” (Romans 5:6). In fact, it was the only “*time*” that would fulfill the Father’s purpose. Note: Our commentary, *The Gospels from a Jewish Perspective*, addresses this subject in greater detail.

ⁱ Lightfoot, John. *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*. Peabody, MA:

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