

The Differences between “Forgiveness” and “Atonement”

Introduction

One of the terms that is frequently used among believers is “forgiveness”. Basically, most believers are aware that each person can receive the forgiveness of his sins, through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Another term, which is also used fairly often, is “atonement”. Most believers have heard that term as well – however, many people think that atonement is *exactly* the same thing as forgiveness. In other words, many people believe that the terms “forgiveness” and “atonement” are synonyms.

Of course, there are some *similarities* between those two terms in Scripture. In particular, both forgiveness and atonement have to do with sin – i.e., they both deal with sins that people have committed. However, that does not necessarily indicate that the meanings of those two terms are *identical*.

So, let’s investigate Scripture, to determine if there are any *differences* between forgiveness and atonement.

Our Forgiveness through Christ

In several places, Scripture “links” our forgiveness through Christ, with the **Passover** festival in the Old Testament. In other words, Scripture associates Jesus with the **lamb** that was killed on Passover – and it also indicates that *because* Jesus is our “Passover lamb”, we can now obtain *forgiveness* of our sins. For example, consider these passages:

John 1:29 (ESV):

²⁹ The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

1 Corinthians 5:7 (ESV):

⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

As shown above, our forgiveness in Christ is “associated” with the Passover festival. As a result, it appears likely that we can obtain additional information about the meaning of forgiveness, if we investigate further into the **Passover** festival.

Of course, that leaves one other question – how can we obtain additional information about the meaning of atonement? As it turns out, there is *another* festival in the Old Testament which explicitly deals with atonement. That festival is called – appropriately enough – the **Day of Atonement**.

So, the next two sections provide information, about the Passover and Day of Atonement festivals.

The Passover

First, consider the passage below, which contains information about the actions taken during the Passover:

Exodus 12:3-13 (ESV):

³ Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. ⁴ And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, ⁶ and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

⁷ "Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. ⁹ Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. ¹⁰ And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹ In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

The Day of Atonement

Now, consider the following passages, which contain details about the Day of Atonement festival:

Leviticus 16:5,7-10,21-22,29-34 (ESV):

⁵ And he [Aaron] shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

⁷ Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁸ And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. ⁹ And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and use it as a sin offering, ¹⁰ but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

²¹ And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. ²² The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.

²⁹ "And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you. ³⁰ For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. ³¹ It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you

shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever. ³² And the priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the holy linen garments. ³³ He shall make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. ³⁴ And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins." And Aaron did as the Lord commanded Moses.

Numbers 29:7-11 (ESV):

⁷ "On the tenth day of this seventh month you shall have a holy convocation and afflict yourselves. You shall do no work, ⁸ but you shall offer a burnt offering to the Lord, a pleasing aroma: one bull from the herd, one ram, seven male lambs a year old: see that they are without blemish. ⁹ And their grain offering shall be of fine flour mixed with oil, three tenths of an ephah for the bull, two tenths for the one ram, ¹⁰ a tenth for each of the seven lambs: ¹¹ also one male goat for a sin offering, besides the sin offering of atonement, and the regular burnt offering and its grain offering, and their drink offerings.

Differences between the Festivals

From the information listed above, the following "general statements" can be made, about the Passover and Day of Atonement festivals:

Passover:

1. Passover is focused on individuals. Every **individual** person must eat from their household's Passover lamb; and every **individual** home must have the blood of the household's Passover lamb placed on its doorposts.
2. Passover does **not** involve sacrifices from the people. Each family does kill a lamb during Passover – but then the people, themselves, eat that lamb. In other words, the people do not really "give up" anything to God on Passover.
3. Passover does **not** require any hardships for people. In other words, people do not need to undergo any sort of "difficulties" or "afflictions" on Passover.

The Day of Atonement:

1. The Day of Atonement is focused on the community. The entire **community** of Israel gathers for the festival; and then a single goat – the "scapegoat" – is used to make atonement for the entire **community**.
2. The Day of Atonement **does** involve sacrifices from the people. Four different types of animals – as well as flour and oil – are offered up to God on the Day of Atonement. Those sacrifices are "burnt" offerings – meaning that they are *completely* consumed by fire.
3. The Day of Atonement **does** require hardships for the people. The community is instructed to "afflict" themselves on the Day of Atonement. Among other things, this means that there is a community-wide **fast** – i.e., it is forbidden to consume any food or water on that day.

As mentioned previously, Passover is associated with our **forgiveness**; and of course the Day of Atonement deals with **atonement**. As a result, based upon all of the above information, the following conclusions can be drawn about the “forgiveness” and “atonement” concepts:

Forgiveness is based on each **individual’s** actions; it does **not** involve sacrificing people’s items to God; and it does **not** require people to undergo physical hardships.

Atonement is based on the **community’s** actions; it **does** involve sacrificing people’s items to God; and it **does** require people to undergo physical hardships.

Basically, **except** for the fact that both terms deal with sin, forgiveness and atonement are almost complete **opposites** of each other!

Christ and the Passover

As mentioned previously, Christ is called our “Passover lamb”. So, let’s compare the forgiveness that we receive through Christ, with the forgiveness listed in the Passover:

1. Forgiveness through Christ is focused on individuals – exactly like Passover. Basically, each and every **individual** needs to come to Christ, in order to have his or her **own** sins forgiven. In other words, forgiveness has *nothing to do* with the community at large.
2. Forgiveness through Christ does **not** require sacrifices from the people – just like Passover. Jesus died for us on the cross – so that **we** do **not** need to die, in order to be forgiven of our sins. In fact, we are not even required to “sacrifice” our money or resources to be forgiven. (Of course, believers are *strongly exhorted* to be generous with their resources – but donating “x” amount of money is not a requirement of forgiveness.)
3. Forgiveness through Christ does **not** require hardships for the people – again, similar to Passover. Basically, people do not need to “afflict” themselves in order to be forgiven. For example, people do not need to go on difficult fasts, or to become ascetic monks, in order to be forgiven. (Of course, it is true that believers will often be *persecuted*, simply because of their faith. However, that persecution is not a requirement of forgiveness – i.e., a believer will not be “denied” forgiveness if he does **not** get persecuted.)

As shown above, our forgiveness through Christ has some very striking “parallels” to the forgiveness listed in the Passover. Not only that, but Jesus precisely “matched” many of the *other* items in Passover as well – such as, he was a lamb “without spot or blemish” (i.e., he was without sin); he died at 3 PM – which was the exact same time that the Passover lambs began being slaughtered, etc.

Christ and the Day of Atonement

As shown above, during Jesus’ **first** appearance on the earth, he established forgiveness for us – and the actions he took to obtain that forgiveness **precisely match** the events in the Passover.

As a result, one might expect that during Jesus’ **second** appearance on the earth, he will bring about atonement for us – and the *actions* to bring about that atonement will **match** the events in the Day of Atonement.

So, let's examine the events that will occur when Jesus returns to the earth – and then determine if there are any similarities between those events and the Day of Atonement.

To begin with, here is some “general information” about the items that will occur during Jesus second appearance. (For each item, only a couple of verses are included for reference; there are *many more* such verses.)

- Jesus will **personally** rule the earth for 1000 years – i.e., for the “millennium” (Revelation 20:4). Jesus' kingdom will be *centered* in Israel; but it will eventually expand over the entire earth (Zechariah 9:10).
- Many of the people who will be alive during the millennium will **not** be followers of Jesus. We know this because some people will die during the millennium (Isaiah 65:20). If only followers of Christ lived during the millennium, then there would *not* be **any** death during that time – because believers are *immediately* given immortality, when they are raised during the first resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:52-54; Revelation 20:6).
- During the millennium, Satan will be “imprisoned” (Revelation 20:1-2). In other words, Satan will be “banished” from the world during that time, so that he will not have the ability to influence anyone (Revelation 20:3).

Now, from the above general information, let's see if we can identify any “points of similarity” between Jesus' return and the Day of Atonement festival:

1. When Jesus returns, he will become the ruler of the entire earth. This means that everyone will become a subject of Jesus – not just certain individuals. That, in turn, means that Jesus' second appearance is focused on the **community** – just like the Day of Atonement is. In fact, Jesus' return deals with an even *larger* community than the Day of Atonement – as Jesus' return affects the entire *world*, rather than only Israel.
2. The fact that Jesus will become the ruler of the earth means that many people will need to “give up” items – i.e., they will need to “**sacrifice**” things – similar to the Day of Atonement. Most obviously, political leaders will need to give up their positions of authority – because Jesus and his followers will obtain all political power in the millennium.

In addition, private companies may need to “give up” items as well – especially their land ownership. Scripture indicates that during the millennium, people will live on their **own** land – as opposed to *renting* land (and homes) from others. Currently, enormous amounts of land are owned by private companies – and many people do not have any real option other than renting space on that land. So, it may be that companies will have to “give up” their land during the millennium – in order to allow each person to live on his own (relatively small) piece of land.

3. During the millennium, many people will undergo “**hardships**” – just like in the Day of Atonement. As mentioned, many of the people who live during the millennium will not be followers of Jesus. The reason why this is important is because many people today have very sinful *attitudes*. Especially in Western countries, many people have the general attitude of: “**No one** is going to tell me what to do”. Of course, that attitude directly leads people to commit all sorts of sins.

Scripture tells us that during the millennium, Jesus and his followers will “rule the earth with a rod of iron” – and that Jesus will “slay the wicked with the breath of his lips”. This indicates that flagrant sins against other people (or against God) will not be tolerated during that time. So, people will need to change their attitudes toward God during the millennium – and that will be a very difficult process for many people. As a result, those people will undergo **hardships** at that time.

4. Scripture tells us that Satan was “a murderer from the beginning”, and that he is “the father of lies” – i.e., he is the epitome of sin. So, when Satan is “imprisoned” – or “banished” – during the millennium, that appears to be symbolic of “**all** sin being banished from the world”.

The reason why this is important is because during the Day of Atonement, all of the sins of the Israelites were placed upon the “scapegoat”; and then that goat was *driven out* into the wilderness – i.e., it was “banished” from the community. That event was definitely symbolic of “**all** sin being banished from the community”.

So, the banishment of Satan during the millennium certainly looks to be similar to the banishment of the scapegoat during the Day of Atonement.

There is one final item to note: **another** article on this site goes into much more *detail*, about the various items that people may need to “give up” after Jesus returns. In other words, that article contains more information about the kinds of events that may occur, as part of Jesus’ *fulfillment* of the Day of Atonement during the millennium. Here is the link to that article:

[Foreshadowing in Genesis Chapter 47](#)

Conclusion

There are **seven** primary festivals listed in the Old Testament; and they are often divided up into two basic “groups”, as follows:

The Spring Festivals: Passover (Pesach), Unleavened Bread (Chag HaMatzot), First Fruits (Reshit Katzir) and Pentecost (Shavuot).

The Fall Festivals: The Day of Trumpets (Yom Teruah, a.k.a. “Rosh Hashanah”), The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot).

During Jesus’ **first** appearance on the earth, he *perfectly* fulfilled all of the spring festivals. In other words, not only did Jesus fulfill Passover, but he *also* fulfilled Unleavened Bread, First Fruits and Pentecost.

As a result, it stands to reason that during Jesus’ **second** appearance, he will *perfectly* fulfill all of the fall festivals. That is, it appears that Jesus will fulfill the Day of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles, **when** he returns!

The information provided in this article contains some general possibilities, about what the *fulfillment* of the Day of Atonement might entail. Come, Lord Jesus!