

Question: Galatians 3:13 says Jesus was “hung on a tree,” yet John 19:19 states that He was crucified on a cross. So which is it? Was it a literal tree, a vertical stake, or a traditional cross made of two beams? And does it even matter?

Answer: Let’s start by examining the Scriptures.

Galatians 3:13 (ESV) “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’”

Paul here is quoting Deuteronomy 21:22–23, where it was written in the Law of Moses:

Deuteronomy 21:22–23 (ESV): “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”

By referencing this passage, Paul is emphasizing the theological truth that Jesus bore the curse of sin in our place. The phrase “hung on a tree” (Greek: *xylon*) doesn’t necessarily mean a literal tree; rather, it refers to anything made of wood. The term was used in Greek literature to describe wooden instruments of execution, including crosses and stakes.

John 19:19 (ESV) “Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’”

Here the Greek word for cross is *stauros*, which historically referred to an upright stake, but by the Roman period, it commonly denoted the two-beamed structure known as a crucifix. Roman crucifixions were widespread and well-documented, and they typically used a *crux immissa* a cross formed by two beams intersecting like a “+” or “t.”

Historical Context of Crucifixion

The Roman Empire, which ruled Judea during Jesus’ earthly life, practiced crucifixion as a public, torturous, and shameful method of execution reserved for slaves, revolutionaries, and the most despised criminals. According to Roman historian Tacitus, crucifixion was designed to maximize suffering and humiliation.

Most historical evidence shows that the Romans used a two-beam cross: a vertical post (*stipes*) permanently fixed in the ground, and a horizontal beam (*patibulum*) which the condemned would carry to the site of execution. Once there, they would be affixed to the *patibulum*, which was then hoisted onto the *stipes* to form the cross.

Matthew 27:32 (ESV) "As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross."

This likely refers to the patibulum, the horizontal beam, which Jesus was too weak to carry after being scourged.

Theologically, the shape or design of the cross is not what carries weight what matters is who was crucified and why.

- *Isaiah 53:5 (ESV) "But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."*
- *1 Peter 2:24 (ESV) "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."*

The phrase “on the tree” in Peter’s epistle echoes Deuteronomy and Galatians, reinforcing that Jesus’ crucifixion fulfilled the curse of the Law so that sinners might be redeemed.

Does the Shape of the Cross Matter?

Some groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, argue that Jesus died on a single upright stake. However, the shape of the wood is not a requirement for salvation. The central tenets of the Gospel are:

1. Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3),
2. He was buried,
3. He rose again on the third day,
4. And He will come again in glory (Acts 1:11, Revelation 22:12).

Whether one envisions a single vertical post or a traditional cross does not impact salvation. What is essential is faith in the redemptive work of Christ, repentance from sin, and new life through Him.

Secondary Matters vs. Essential Doctrine

Knowing the type of wood used, the size, or the exact appearance of the cross doesn’t affect our standing before God. Just as knowing what Jesus looked like physically adds nothing to our salvation, neither does knowing the precise design of the instrument on which He died.

As Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 2:2 (ESV) “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

The message of the cross is what matters not its shape.

Jesus was most likely crucified on a two-beamed wooden cross, consistent with Roman practices. Yet, theologically, what matters is that He was crucified not the shape of the wood. Believers should focus not on the external instrument, but on the internal reality of the atonement, resurrection, and return of Christ.

Let us continue in repentance, walk in holiness, and wait in hope.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

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