

# John Huss - Protestant Martyr

## Introduction



A brief history of the life, sufferings and martyrdom of John Huss, who was burnt at Constance, in Germany.

John Huss was a Bohemian by birth, born in the village of Hussinetz about the year 1380. His parents gave him the best education they could bestow, and, having acquired a tolerable knowledge of the classics at a private school, he was set thence to the University of Prague, where he soon became conspicuous by his talents and industry.

Trithemius speaks of him as "a man of very great note for his judgment, subtlety, eloquence, and knowledge of the Scriptures;" and the Jesuit Balbinus, who was certainly not prejudiced in his favour, gives him the following character in his *Epitome of the History of Bohemia*. "John Huss," says that Jesuit, "was more subtle than eloquent but the modesty and severity of his manners; his unpolished, austere, and entirely blameless life; his pale, thin visage; his good nature and his affability to all, even to the meanest persons, were more persuasive than the greatest eloquence."

In 1408 he commenced as bachelor of divinity, and was afterwards successively chosen pastor for the Church of Bethlehem, in Prague and rector of the university. These trusts he discharged with great fidelity, and became at length so celebrated for his preaching, and his bold utterance of truth, that he soon attracted the notice and excited the malignity of the Pope and his creatures.

But the principal cause which aroused the indignation of Huss was a bull published by Pope John XXIII, promising remission of sins to all who would join his forces against Ladislaus, King of Naples, who had now invaded the States of the Church. When this bull was published in Prague, Huss could not refrain from preaching against it as repugnant to the spirit of the Christian religion. The Pope, therefore, summoned him to Rome, and, upon his refusing to comply, excommunicated him, and forbade divine service being performed in all the churches of Prague except one, so long as Huss remained in the city. To avoid disturbances, Huss retired to Hussinetz, and appealed from the Pope to Jesus Christ.

The English reformer, Wycliffe, had so kindled the light of the Reformation that it began to pierce the darkest corners of Popery. His doctrines were received in Bohemia with eagerness and zeal by great numbers of people, and especially by John Huss and his friend and fellow-martyr, Jerome of Prague.

The influence of Huss in the university was very great, not only on account of his learning, eloquence, and exemplary life, but also on account of some valuable privileges he had obtained from the King on behalf of the Bohemians in that seminary.

Sincerely attached to the doctrines of Wycliffe, Huss strenuously opposed the decree of the archbishop, who obtained a bull from the Pope, authorizing him to prevent the publishing of Wycliffe's writings in his province. By virtue of this bull the archbishop condemned the writings of Wycliffe. He also proceeded against four doctors who had not delivered up some copies, and prohibited them to preach. Against these proceedings Dr. Huss, with some other members of the university, protested, and entered an appeal from the sentences of the archbishop. The Pope no sooner heard of this than he granted a commission to Cardinal Colonna to cite John Huss to appear at the court of Rome, to answer accusations laid against him of preaching both errors and heresies. From this appearance Dr. Huss desired to be excused, and so greatly was he favoured in Bohemia, that King Wenceslaus, the Queen, the nobility, and the university desired the Pope to dispense with such an appearance as also that he would not suffer the kingdom of Bohemia to lie under the accusation of heresy, but permit them to preach the Gospel with freedom in their places of worship.

Three proctors appeared for Dr. Huss before Cardinal Colonna; they pleaded an excuse for his absence, and said they were ready to answer in his behalf. But the cardinal declared him contumacious, and, accordingly, excommunicated him. On this the proctors appealed to the Pope, who appointed four cardinals to examine the process. These commissioners confirmed the sentence of the cardinal, and extended the excommunication, not only to Huss, but to all his friends and followers. Huss then appealed from this unjust sentence to a future council, but without success and, notwithstanding so severe a decree, and an expulsion from his church in Prague, he retired to Hussinetz, where he continued to promulgate the truth, both from the pulpit and with the pen.

In the month of November, in the year 1414, a general council was assembled at Constance, in Germany, for the purpose of determining a dispute then existing between three persons who contended for the Papal throne. These were John, proposed and set up by the Italians; Gregory, by the French; and Benedict, by the Spaniards. The council continued four years, in which the severest laws were enacted to crush the Protestants. Pope John was deposed, and obliged to fly, more than forty crimes being proved against him; among which were, his attempt to poison his predecessor, his being a gamester, a liar, a murderer, an adulterer, and guilty of unnatural offences. The author of

the memorial containing the accusations against John XXIII closes it with these words, "He is universally looked upon, as will be found upon the slightest inquiry, as the sink of vice, the enemy of all virtue, the mirror of infamy, and all who know him speak of him as a devil incarnate." If we contrast the character of these two chief actors, we shall see that it was, as it has ever been, vice persecuting virtue.

John Huss was summoned to appear at this council; and to dispel any apprehensions of danger, the emperor sent him a safe-conduct, the wording being, "You shall let John Huss pass, stop, stay, and return freely, without any hindrance whatever." On receiving this information, he told the persons who delivered it that he desired nothing more than to purge himself publicly of the imputation of heresy and that he esteemed himself happy in having so fair an opportunity of it as at the council to which he was summoned to attend.

On his way he met with every mark of affection and reverence from people of all descriptions. The streets, and even the roads, were thronged with people, whom respect, rather than curiosity, had brought together. He was ushered into the towns with great acclamations and he passed through Germany in a kind of triumph. "I thought," said he, "I had been an outcast. I now see my worst friends are in Bohemia."

Notwithstanding the promise of the emperor to give him a safe conduct to and from Constance, no regard was paid to the imperial pledge but, according to the maxim of this same council, that "faith is not to be kept with heretics," when it was known he was in the city, he was arrested, and imprisoned in the palace. This breach of faith was noticed by one of Huss's friends, who pleaded the imperial safe-conduct but the Pope replied that he had not granted any such thing, nor was he bound by the obligations of the emperor.

While Huss was under confinement, the council acted the part of inquisitors. They condemned the doctrines of Wycliffe, and in their impotent malice ordered his remains to be exhumed, and burnt to ashes, which orders were obeyed.

In the meantime the nobility of Bohemia and Poland used all their interest for Huss, and so far prevailed as to prevent his being condemned unheard, which had been resolved on by the commissioners appointed to try him.

At length he was brought before the council. When the articles exhibited against him were read they were upwards of twenty-six in number, and chiefly extracted from his writings.

On his examination being finished, he was taken from the court and a resolution was formed by the council to burn him as an heretic unless he retracted. He was then committed to a filthy prison, where, in the daytime, he was so laden with fetters that he could hardly move and every night he was fastened by his hands to a ring against the walls of the prison.

He continued some days in this situation, during which time many noblemen of Bohemia interceded on his behalf. They drew up a petition for his release, which was presented to the council by several of the most illustrious nobles of Bohemia notwithstanding which, so many enemies had Huss in that court, that no attention was paid to it, and the reformer was compelled to submit to the sentence of that merciless tribunal.

Shortly after the petition was presented, four bishops and two lords were sent by the emperor to the prison, in order to prevail on Huss to recant. But he called God to witness, with tears in his eyes, that he was not conscious of having preached or written anything against the truth of God, or the faith of his orthodox Church. The deputies then represented the great wisdom and authority of the council: to which Huss replied, "Let them send the meanest person of that council, who can convince me by argument from the word of God, and I will submit my judgment to him." The deputies, finding they could not make an impression on him, departed, greatly astonished at the strength of his resolution.

On the 4th of July he was, for the last time, brought before the council. After a long examination he was commanded to abjure, which, without hesitation, he refused to do. The Bishop of Lodi then preached a sermon concerning the destruction of heretics, the text of which was, "Let the body of sin be destroyed," the prologue to Huss's punishment. After the close of the sermon his fate was determined, his vindication rejected, and judgment pronounced. The council censured him for being obstinate and incorrigible, and ordained that he should be degraded from the priesthood, his books publicly burnt, and himself delivered to the secular power. He received the sentence without the least emotion; and at the close of it kneeled down, and lifting his eyes toward heaven, exclaimed, with the magnanimity of a primitive martyr, "May thy infinite mercy, O my God! Pardon this injustice of mine enemies. Thou knowest the injustice of my accusations: how deformed with crimes I have been represented; how I have been oppressed with worthless witnesses, and a false condemnation; yet, O my God! Let that mercy of thine, which no tongue can express, prevail with thee not to avenge my wrongs."

But these excellent sentences were received as so many expressions of treason, and only tended to inflame his adversaries. Accordingly, the bishops appointed by the council stripped him of his priestly garments, degraded him, and put a paper mitre on his head, on which were painted three devils, with this inscription "Heresiarch." This mockery was received by the martyr with an air of unconcern, and seemed to give him dignity rather than disgrace. A serenity appeared in his looks, which indicated that his soul was approaching the realms of everlasting happiness; and when the bishop urged him to recant, he turned to the people and addressed them thus -

"These lords and bishops do counsel me that I should confess before you all that I have erred; which thing, if it might be done with the infamy and reproach of man only, they might, peradventure, easily persuade me to do; but now I am in the sight of the Lord my God, without whose great displeasure I

could not do that which they require. For I well know that I never taught any of those things which they have falsely alleged against me, but I have preached, taught, written, and thought contrary thereunto. Should I by this my example trouble so many consciences, endued with the most certain knowledge of the Scriptures and of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? I will never do it, neither commit any such offence, that I should seem to esteem this vile carcase appointed unto death more than their health and salvation." At this most godly word he was forced again to hear that he did obstinately persevere in his pernicious errors.

The ceremony of degradation being over, the bishops delivered him to the emperor, who handed him over to the Duke of Bavaria. His books were burnt at the gates of the church; and on the 6th of July he was led to the suburbs of Constance to be burnt alive.

Having reached the place of execution, he fell on his knees, sung several portions of the Psalms, and looked steadfastly towards heaven, saying, "Into thy hands, O Lord! Do I commit my spirit. Thou hast redeemed me, O most good and faithful God." As soon as the chain was put about him at the stake, he said, with a smiling countenance, "My Lord Jesus Christ was bound with a harder chain than this for my sake why, then, should I be ashamed of this old rusty one?"

When the faggots were piled around him, the Duke of Bavaria was so officious as to desire him to abjure. "No," said he, "I never preached any doctrine of an evil tendency and what I taught with my lips I now seal with my blood." He then said to the executioner, "You are now going to burn a goose (the name of Huss signifying goose in the Bohemian language), but in a century you will have a swan whom you can neither roast nor boil." If this were spoken in prophecy, he must have alluded to Martin Luther, who came about a hundred years after, and had a swan on his coat of arms.

As soon as the faggots were lighted, the martyr sung a hymn, with so cheerful a voice, that he was heard above the cracklings of the fire and the noise of the multitude. At length his voice was interrupted by the flames, which soon put an end to his existence. His ashes were collected, and, by order of the council, thrown into the Rhine, lest his adherents should honour them as relics. — *The Reformer* - November/December 2001

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