

The Roman Catholic archbishop of Prague, finding the *reformists* (as they were called) daily increasing, issued a decree to suppress the further spreading of Wycliffe’s writings. But this had an effect different than what he expected, for it stimulated the supporters of Wycliffe and Huss to greater effort until almost everyone in the university was united to spread these teachings as far as they could.

Because Huss so strongly agreed with the doctrines of Wycliffe, he opposed the archbishop’s decree personally and from the pulpit. The archbishop then obtained an official document from the pope, giving him the authority to stop anyone from publishing Wycliffe’s doctrines in his province. Upon receiving this *papal bull*, the archbishop immediately condemned Wycliffe’s writings, and commanded any who had such writings to turn them over to him. When four Doctors of Divinity did not, he issued a decree that they were forbidden to preach to any congregation. Huss and four members of the university protested the decree.

When the pope heard of this, he commissioned a Cardinal Colonna to summon John Huss to Rome and answer the accusations that he was preaching errors and heresies. Upon Huss’s request, King Wincelau and his wife, certain noble people, and the university leaders, requested that the pope dispense with Huss’s personal appearance in Rome, and that the pope not permit any in Bohemia to be accused of heresy, and permit all priests in Bohemia to freely preach the gospel in their churches.

Three representatives appeared for Dr. Huss before Cardinal Colonna to explain why he could not appear, and said they could answer any questions on his behalf. But the cardinal declared that Huss was stubbornly disobedient, and immediately deprived him of any further rights of church membership by excommunicating him. Huss’s representatives then appealed to the pope, who commissioned four cardinals to review the process. The cardinals not only confirmed the sentence but enlarged the excommunication to include all of Huss’s friends and followers, which included his four representatives.

Huss appealed the sentence but it was no use, and since he could no longer preach in the Bethlehem chapel in Prague, he retired to his home town of

Hussnitz, where he continued to teach and to preach both from the pulpit and in writing. During this time he wrote numerous letters and a long discourse in which he insisted that no one had the authority to forbid anyone from reading books by reformers like Wycliffe. He also wrote books against the corrupt vices of the Roman Catholic pope, cardinals, and clergy. Huss’s arguments were forceful and biblically sound and convinced many that he was right.

In November 1414, a council was called in Constance, Germany, for the purpose of bringing to an end the schism in the Roman Catholic Church that had resulted in three competing popes. It was called together at the insistence of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund. During the proceedings, the council declared itself to be superior to the papacy, and removed two of the popes, John XXIII and Benedict XIII, and requested that the third, Gregory XII, relinquish his office. They then elected a new pope, Martin V. Before they adjourned in 1418, the council also agreed that general councils, which they stated had powers superior to popes, would in the future meet regularly to determine church policies and doctrines. But when the Council of Basel met in 1431-37, the pope declared the council heretical and reaffirmed the papacy’s superiority over any such council. Ultimately, little came of the council’s effort to reform the Roman Catholic Church, and its vices and corruption continued.

John Huss had been invited to attend the Council of Constance, and was guaranteed safe conduct by Emperor Sigismund. Nevertheless, charges of heresy were drawn up against him and presented to the pope and the members of the council. Soon after Huss arrived in Constance, about January 1415, he was arrested and confined to a room in the palace. When some of Huss’s friends pointed out to the council that this was a violation of the law and of the emperor’s vow of safe conduct, the pope replied that he himself had never granted any safe conduct, and he was not bound by anything the emperor had said. When an appeal was made to Emperor Sigismund based on his vow of safe conduct, he refused to intervene and protect Huss. This later caused the emperor much grief after he became Bohemian King in 1419 and was drawn into the devastating Hussite Wars.

Since there were no papal inquisitors to try Huss, the council itself assumed that role. In their foolishness, they first condemned John Wycliffe, who had died in 1384, and ordered his body to be dug up and burned to ashes, and the ashes thrown into the Rhine River.

When Huss was brought before them, they read forty articles against him, most of them taken from his writings, and most of them perverted to prove their accusations. To the accusations, Huss replied: “I appealed to the pope, who died before my appeal was determined, so I then appealed to his successor, John XXIII. But since I was not allowed to defend my cause for over two years, I appealed to the high judge Jesus Christ.”

The council asked if it was lawful for him to appeal to Christ. To which he answered,

Truthfully I say before you all that there is no more just or effective appeal than an appeal that is made to Christ. For the law says that to appeal is to ask a higher judge to right the wrong done to you by a lesser judge. I ask you, who is a higher judge than Christ? Who can judge the matter more justly, or be more impartial and fair? There is no deceit in Christ, and He cannot be deceived, so who can help the miserable and oppressed better than He?

While Huss was speaking he was laughed at and mocked by all the council members, who then became enraged at his words and condemned him to be burned.

Seven bishops came forward and commanded Huss to put on the garments of a priest, which he did. They then began to degrade and mock him as they removed the priestly garments from him one at a time. At one point they debated how they should remove the **shaven crown* of his head. Huss commented, “I am amazed that since you are all of one cruel mind, you cannot agree on the manner of performing this cruelty.”

The bishops decided that they should cut off the crown of his head with a pair of shears, which they proceeded to do. Then on his bloodied head they put a paper bishop’s hat that had demons painted on it and

* About the 8th century in Europe, a form of hairdressing in which the crown of the head is shaved was adopted by Christian monastic orders to indicate dedication to the service of God.

the words, “A ringleader of heretics.” When Huss saw it, he said, “For my sake, my Lord Jesus Christ wore a crown of thorns, so for His sake, why should I not wear this light crown, even though it is a shameful thing?”

When the bishop put the paper miter on Huss’s head, he said, “Now we commit your soul to hell.” Huss lifted his eyes toward heaven and said, “But I commend into your hands, O Lord Jesus Christ, my spirit that you have redeemed.”

Huss was then led past a fire where they were burning his books, and he was bound to a stake with a chain. As the executioner wrapped the chain around him, Huss smiled and said, “My Lord Jesus Christ was bound with a harder chain than this one for my sake, so why should I be ashamed of this rusty chain?”

The bundles of sticks were piled up to his neck, and then the duke of Bavaria tried to get him to recant his teachings. Huss replied, “No, I never preached any doctrine that was evil, and what I taught with my lips, I will now seal with my blood.” When the fires were lit and the flames engulfed him, Huss sang a hymn so loud and cheerful that he could be heard above the crackling of the burning sticks and the noise of the crowd watching him burn. Soon, however, his voice stopped as the flames reached his throat and face, and he slumped forward against his chains.

With continued foolishness, as with Wycliffe, the bishops carefully gathered Huss’s ashes and cast them into the Rhine River so that no remnant of Huss would remain on the earth. They could not, however, by torment, fire, or water, erase his memory or his teachings out of the minds of his supporters. Through them, his memory and teachings would continue to be honored and spread far and wide. In death, Huss was more of a threat to the papacy than in life.

Out of his death, also, were born the Hussites, who were Czech religious reformers that followed his teachings. They formed the nucleus of a national movement in Bohemia and Moravia after his death on July 6, 1415. Huss’s condemnation for heresy at the Council of Constance and his execution, despite the guarantee of safe conduct given by Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund, were regarded by the Czech people as a national affront. It was an affront that many never forgot and that led to the Hussite Wars.☒

JEROME OF PRAGUE MARTYRED 1416

JEROME of Prague was born in 1370. He was a Bohemian church reformer and wandering scholar. He attended several universities and seminaries in various cities: Prague, Paris, Heidelberg, Cologne, and Oxford, during which he learned to speak excellent English. At Oxford, he became acquainted with the writings of John Wycliffe, and while there translated many of them from English into the Czech language. His books were circulated throughout Bohemia, and it was from these that John Huss learned of the doctrines of Wycliffe.

When Jerome returned to Bohemia, he found that his books were widely read in the city and the university, and that John Huss had become the chief promoter of them and Wycliffe's teachings. So he immediately associated himself with Huss.

After Huss was betrayed and arrested at the Council of Constance, Jerome went to Constance, arriving there on April 4, 1415, about three months before Huss was burned. He entered the city secretly for fear of being arrested, and consulted with some of the leaders of those who also believed in Wycliffe's doctrines. They easily convinced him that he could be of no service to Huss because of the council's unchangeable determination to condemn and burn Huss as a heretic. Jerome then went to Iberling, an imperial town that was under the protection of the emperor, and sent a letter to appear before the council on Huss's behalf if the emperor would give him safe conduct – this was refused. He then wrote to the Council of Constance concerning the same matter, and was refused both an appearance on Huss's behalf and safe conduct.

Jerome then started back to Bohemia, but never made it. He was illegally seized and captured by an officer on the orders of the duke of Sultsbach. A German prince on horseback assigned to guard Jerome met them on the way with numerous attendants. He had Jerome's feet shackled and a long chain attached around his neck. He then triumphantly and with great fanfare led Jerome back to Constance,

where Jerome was put into a foul dungeon to await the pleasure of his inquisitors.

Jerome's treatment was much like that given to Huss, except that he was confined considerably longer and was often moved to a different prison. It was nearly a year after his capture before he was brought before the council. Charges were read against him which can be summed up under five headings: (1) that he ridiculed the papal dignity, (2) that he opposed the pope, (3) that he was an enemy of the cardinals, (4) that he was a persecutor of the bishops, (5) that he was a hater of the Christian religion.

Jerome denied all the charges and was returned to prison. There he was hung by his heels with chains for eleven days. Brought back to the council and threatened with worse torture, Jerome eventually gave in to their threats to save his life and agreed that the writings of John Wycliffe were false and that John Huss had been fairly condemned and burned as a heretic. He was returned to prison where he was no longer tortured and received better treatment. Before long, however, it became obvious that Jerome had not truly agreed with the council. He retracted his denunciation of Wycliffe and Huss, and new articles of heresy were drawn up against him.

On May 25, 1416, after 340 days of imprisonment, Jerome was brought before the Council of Constance and charged with 107 offenses, all of which he denied or disproved in short order, silencing his interrogators with his strength and knowledge of God's Word. However, the outcome of the hearing was never really in doubt, no matter what Jerome said.

He, like Huss, was condemned and sentenced to be burned at the stake as a heretic. Since he was not a priest, however, he did not have to experience the degradation that Huss did.

On the way to the stake, Jerome sang several hymns. When he was taken to the exact spot where Huss was burned, he knelt down and prayed fervently, and embraced the stake before being chained. Before the fire was started, he said to the assembled crowd, "What I have just sung, I believe. This creed is my whole faith, but I'm dying today because I refuse to deny that John Huss was a true preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

The fire was lit, and because the sticks were extremely dry they flared into flames that quickly enveloped him. He sang a hymn for a short time, but was soon silenced by the searing fire, yet his lips continued to move and his head to shake for quite some time. Finally dead in the fire, all his possessions from prison were burned and his ashes were thrown into the Rhine River. His last words that could be heard by the witnesses were, "This soul in flames I offer Christ to Thee." The day of his martyrdom was May 30, 1416. ☒

"And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death" (Rev 12:11)

These stories are actual and historical accounts of Christian suffering taken from the famous *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Born in 1516, John Foxe of England, professor of Oxford University, wrote his book to document the persecution against Christ's Church by pagans and by those who called themselves Christians but were not. It's a book about God's grace and Christian faithfulness. First published in English in 1563, Foxe's book has endured for over four-hundred years as a memorial to the martyrs, and a legacy of inspiration and courage to the true Church of Jesus Christ.

Before he died in 1587, Foxe had the joy of seeing four large editions of his book published. The Council of Bishops ordered it placed in every cathedral church in England, and like the Bible, it was often chained to the pulpit.

Eventually there came a time, not only in England, but all over the English-speaking world, when a home wasn't considered to be Christian unless it openly displayed a Bible and *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Years later, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, published in 1678, had the honor of being included with those two books as basic and essential Christian reading. ☒

2 BOHEMIAN MARTYRS

"And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev 17:6)

JOHN HUSS MARTYRED 1415

JOHNN HUSS was born at Hussenitz, Bohemia, in 1372. He studied theology at the University of Prague, and was ordained a Roman Catholic priest and appointed a preacher at the Bethlehem chapel in Prague in 1402. In 1409, Huss was made head of the university.

Huss was greatly influenced by the writings of John Wycliffe (1320-1384), especially his rejection of any biblical basis for the Roman Catholic pope having authority over the Church; his insistence that the Scriptures were the foremost authority in all Church matters; his insistence on extensive reforms in all Church matters; his insistence on extensive reforms in the wealth, corruption, and abuses of the Roman Catholic Church; his denial of the church's doctrine of transubstantiation, which teaches that the communion bread and wine become the actual body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ when the priest prays over them, although their appearances remain the same; and his argument that Christians should have a Bible in their own language that they could read for themselves. At that time, all Bibles were in the papist Latin and for use only by the clergy, which kept knowledge of the Scriptures hidden from the common people; some Bibles used for saying mass were chained to the pulpit so they could not be taken out of the building by a lay person.

Huss not only believed the doctrines of Wycliffe but began to teach them from his church pulpit and at the university. By doing so, there was no way he could long escape the attention of the pope and his supporters, against whom Huss protested loudly and strongly.