

59. JOHN HUSS 1369-1415(2): IMPOSED SILENCE

In the year 1414, the German city of Constance was a hive of activity. The streets were full of people. Every day large groups of people passed through the gates into the city. Roman bishops and archbishops, cardinals and other prominent clergy members with their numerous servants, princes and nobles, and other people, daily arrived at Constance. Finally, they no longer knew where to lodge them. To shelter them all, they built long rows of barracks where thousands of guests could sleep.

What is going on?

A great council, an important church meeting is to be held in that city.

That's why so many people have come to Constance.

The German emperor *Sigismund* wants to put an end to all that confusion in the Church.

The great schism was still happening.

There were still three popes.

Confusion and division were on the increase everywhere.

That had to end.

So, at the command of Emperor Sigismund, this great council was convened. They came from all directions. When the meeting finally opened, 29 cardinals, three patriarchs, 33 archbishops, 150 bishops, 300 abbots from the monasteries, 300 professors, thousands of servants, besides princes, nobles and knights, also each with their retinue, were present. They estimated that more than 70,000 people went to Constance to attend that council!

A large number!

That council finally managed to end the great schism in the Roman Catholic Church. The three popes, who ruled the Church (one was present but later fled from Constance), were all deposed, and the council appointed another pope. One of the three popes consented to that

decision and withdrew, but the other two resisted till they died. Nobody obeyed them anymore.

The council also spoke about John Wycliffe's writings. These were still eagerly read and accepted by many. At the council of Constance, they condemned and rejected the doctrines of Wycliffe. Wycliffe was regarded as a heretic, and at that assembly, they decided that his bones must be dug up and burnt. They could not even let the dead rest.

Did they test the doctrines of Wycliffe with God's Word?

Did they ask God for wisdom and light in all their decisions?

I do not think so!

However, Emperor Sigismund still had another matter to discuss. He wanted to bring the confusion in Bohemia into the discussion. He was keen to see the unrest in Bohemia end. The king of Bohemia was the brother of Emperor Sigismund. If he died, then Sigismund would succeed him as king of Bohemia. Bohemia was his heritage.



Portrait of Emperor Sigismund, painted by Albrecht Dürer after the emperor's death. Wikipedia

They estimated that more than 70,000 people went to Constance to attend that council!

That was why the emperor had also sent an invitation to John Huss to attend that council and asked him to voluntarily come to Constance to defend himself and clear his name of the blame cast on

him. He promised John Huss safe conduct. That meant that the emperor would make sure that he would safely get to Constance and back. The emperor promised Huss that he need not fear because no harm would come to him. The emperor would protect him against all possible attempts on his life.

When John Huss received that invitation, he decided to go. He trusted the word of the emperor. His friends advised him against it, but Huss was determined. He hoped that he could convince them. Oh, if those clergymen would only listen to him, if they would be willing to return to the truth, to the Word of the Lord, how happy he would be!

HUSS GOES TO CONSTANCE

Huss packed for the journey and left Bohemia. He arrived at Constance before Emperor Sigismund. So he was early enough.

A monastery of the Dominican monks was also in Constance. As we told you already in chapter 54,

this monastery belonged to the mendicant order. They were the leaders of the Inquisition.

Come, let's look inside that monastery. We walk through numberless passages and rooms. Next, we descend several steps and stop before a heavy door covered with iron bars.

The warden opens the door, and we enter. Involuntarily we recoil.

A rank, foul smell of sewerage hits our nostrils. Some rats scamper past our feet and disappear into a dark corner.

It is dark and cold in this cell. In a corner lies some mouldy rotting straw. The straw rustles, and a human form slowly rises with difficulty.

That man looks terrible.

His eyes have sunk deep into their sockets and look puffy.

His face is a sickly pale colour and looks drawn and thin.

What else could you expect when living in such terrible surroundings? Who is that miserable man?



John Huss at the Council of Constance. Painting by Karl Friedrich Lessing 1839. artsand.google.com

That man is ... John Huss!

What?

John Huss? Didn't he have a safe-conduct from the emperor?

Yes, that is true! He had travelled to Constance in good faith.

On Nov. 3, 1414, he had arrived. He received a spacious, well-lit room, and at first, he received adequate treatment. But his enemies did not rest. A few professors from the university at Prague were also present in Constance. They saw their chance and lodged a complaint against him.

On Nov. 28, 1414, some Mendicant monks suddenly surrounded the house where Huss was staying. They arrested him and locked him up in a dark, musty cell in the Dominican monastery. When Emperor Sigismund, who by then had also arrived in Constance, heard that, he demanded that they had to set John Huss free immediately.

But Huss' enemies did not like that idea at all!

Release John Huss?

Out of the question!

They were only too happy to have him in their power! Their victim would not escape them now that they had him!

To Sigismund, they declared:

"You do not have to keep the word you gave to a heretic!"

And? Emperor Sigismund allowed them to persuade him and shamefully broke the promise he had given to Huss. Huss *was* a prisoner, and he *remained* a prisoner. For seven months, they tortured him, both physically and spiritually.

He must and shall recant! Time and again, they visited him. They were busy with him for hours at a time. They subjected him to exhausting interrogations. But Huss firmly refused to recant.

He said:

"Convince me then out of God's Word that I am wrong!"

But they could not do that. The Inquisition cruelly abused him for months and months! They demanded unconditional obedience to the

doctrine of the Church, even when it completely contradicted God's Word.

Eventually, John Huss became seriously ill. That was not surprising. But his bitter enemies did not want him to die yet. He first had to recant, then *they* would emerge as victors! So he was transferred to a better room and received better care and healthy food. And Huss recovered again.

He constantly asked to be allowed to defend himself before the council, as they had promised. Finally, they granted his request.

BEFORE THE COUNCIL

On June 5, 1415, Huss appeared for the first time before that large ecclesiastical assembly. A few days later, they called him again. But he was not permitted to defend himself or explain his point of view. The council asked Huss if he wished to recant, and he was only allowed to answer with a "Yes" or "No". When John Huss tried to say something in his defence, the Roman clergy would not allow him to speak. They began to howl and whistle loudly. They made such a noise that no one could hear or understand him. Their behaviour was more than shameful, and *they* were the leaders of the people!

Huss could not speak in that tumult, so he just kept silent. He only commented:

"I always imagined it would be more dignified at a council."

On the 6th of July, which was his birthday, he appeared before the council for the last time. Pale and wasted, he stood there, a living indictment to the shameful manner in which the Inquisition had treated him. Again he was asked if he would recant. Calmly he attempted to answer, but immediately that disgraceful noise started again.

Indignantly, John Huss cried out:

"*Please*, let me speak! I came here voluntarily, and the emperor himself even gave me safe-conduct!"

When he heard this, Emperor Sigismund turned bright red, but he kept silent! However, he did try one more time to get Huss to deny his teachings. Huss answered:

"Then prove to me that I have erred!"

But they could not give that proof! Just rescind!
He had to recant without arguing!
Huss firmly refused to do so. So then they condemned him to death. He would have to die by fire. They led him to the large cathedral in Constance. There Huss was first dressed as a priest. The chalice, that is, the communion cup, was then thrust into his hand. After that, he was roughly undressed while they hurled the most abusive denunciations and curses at him that they could think of. Then they snatched the communion cup out of his hands, declaring: "Accursed Judas, we take from you this cup of salvation!" Huss answered calmly:

"Even today, I shall drink this cup in His Kingdom!"

Then they dressed him in a garment of mockery and put a paper hat with three devils painted on it on his head. On this hat, they had written: 'This is an Arch-Heretic'.

One of the bishops there even preached a sermon on Romans 6:6: "...that the body of sin might be destroyed." That "body of sin" was John Huss!

That's how the bishop twisted God's Word!

Then they led John Huss to the place where they would execute this unjust sentence. They tied him to a stake. Under his feet were several bundles of dry branches and some bundles of straw so that the fire would burn better. More wood was stacked up all around him, up to his neck. For the last time, they asked if perhaps he would still retract. Huss' answer was clear: "What must I retract? I am not conscious of any error", and he firmly added, "I am prepared to die for the Gospel." John Huss was not afraid to die. He was ready to give his life for the truth.

Then the bishop gave the sign for the stake to be lit. Little flames shot up eagerly, promptly finding food in the flammable material, and rapidly grew.

A plume of smoke rose and floated away slowly over the heads of the thousands of spectators.



On July 6, 1415, Czech reformer John Huss was convicted of heresy at the Council of Constance and sentenced to be burned at the stake. Learnreligions.com

Huss raised his eyes to heaven. Once more, they heard his voice above the increasing crackling of the flames. It was a prayer.

"Lord Jesus, Thou Son of the Living God, be merciful to me!"

These were his last words. Smoke and flames soon choked his voice. Soon after, Huss had entered eternal glory.

There he joined in singing hymns of praise with the saints.

The flames consumed his body, but that no longer hurt him.

Finally, the fire burned itself out. The priests gathered his ashes and scattered them in the Rhine River. That did not matter. God, the Almighty One, knows what happened to every particle of ash, and his body will rise again. Not the council of Constance, but John Huss had conquered! Immovably, he endured to the end. He was faithful unto death, and now he received the crown of life. However, God will require his martyr's blood from the hands of those who proclaimed the death sentence on him. That blood will burn eternally on the consciences of his executioners.

JEROME OF PRAGUE

Almost a year later, the Roman clergy carried out another death sentence in Constance. Again the flames blazed up high. Again, fire and smoke smothered a praying voice. Then Jerome of Prague died the death of a hero.

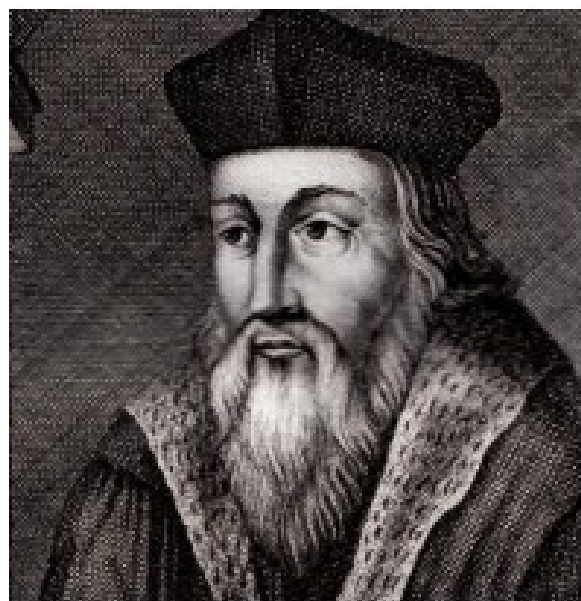
Jerome of Prague?
Who was he?

He was a Bohemian nobleman and friend of John Huss. Jerome was a remarkably gifted and capable man. However, he was not part of the clergy but a lawyer. Jerome had studied at various universities: in Prague, Paris and Oxford. In Oxford, he found the writings of John Wycliffe and took them with him to Bohemia. He gave copies of them to John Huss to read. They worked together for many years. When Jerome heard that the Roman clergy had imprisoned his friend Huss in Constance, he hastened to that city hoping to

help him. But he soon realised that he could do nothing for John Huss and was in great danger himself! So Jerome hurriedly left Constance and travelled back to Prague. He was already well on the way home when his enemies caught up with him and arrested him. Heavily shackled, as if he was a dangerous criminal, they brought him back to Constance on a cart. Like Huss, he was locked up in a musty cell and treated roughly. They intentionally shackled him so heavily that he could not sit up straight. That was cruel.

It was May 1415 when the Inquisition put him in a cell, and they made him spend more than a year there. They demanded that he must revoke everything he had taught. He also had to declare that the sentences on Wycliffe and Huss were correct. They tortured him for months. Eventually, he became seriously ill. Because he was physically and spiritually exhausted, he finally capitulated. He acknowledged that the Roman clergy had justly condemned Wycliffe and Huss. True, that was sinful and wrong, but let us not judge him too harshly. Because of all the misery he had suffered, he had no resistance left. They had broken his spirit for a moment. Yet, he added something to that. He said:

"I acknowledge that it was just except for the holy truths which were taught by both."



Jerome of Prague 1370's-1416.
amazingdiscoveries.org

His enemies rejoiced! At last! They had been successful! His tormenters quickly rushed to the council, which was still in session to announce the glad tidings. But, because of the last words of Jerome, they did not trust his retraction, and instead of setting the prisoner free, they kept him in prison. Weeks, months went by.

Come, in our thoughts, we'll visit him.

We enter his dark, musty cell. See Jerome sitting there, his weary head propped up by his hands. Big tears well up from his eyes and fall on the cold stone floor of his cell. Occasionally he slowly shakes his head.

"Oh, Jerome, what is the matter?"

Well, the figure of John Huss constantly looms large before him. *He* remained faithful unto death, while he ... he had denied his best friend!

He had renounced the cause of the Lord, for which he had battled for so many years! Ever since he yielded to the pressure of his enemies and recanted, he has lost the peace in his soul.

His hot tears continue to fall on the cold slabs. Tears of repentance! Intense sorrow rips his troubled soul apart. Only God knows how much he has wrestled in prayer in that gloomy cell. You may be sure that he confessed his distress and misery to God.

Just like Peter was unfaithful by denying his Master but was sought out and restored to his office by a loving Christ, so God visited Jerome in his dark cell and comforted his distressed soul. What grace!

The conviction grew in him that he must right the wrong he had done.

For that to happen, even his enemies had to cooperate. They came with new accusations against him and demanded that he revoke more things. Jerome firmly refused to answer that while in prison. He wanted to justify himself before the entire assembly.

At first, they would not agree because they feared his oratory skill. But Jerome would not yield an inch, and finally, they gave their consent. Okay,

he could appear before the council, but he may only answer "Yes" or "No" to the questions asked. Jerome answered:

"Oh, no, I refuse to do that. I want to be able to defend myself properly." In this, too, he finally got it his way.

In May 1416, he appeared, shackled, thin and wasted, before the council. His body was thoroughly weakened, but spiritually he was stronger than ever. *Now* he no longer feared death!

'With joyful brow and cheerful countenance, and elated face he went to his doom. He feared not the flames, not the torments, not death. None of the Stoics ever suffered death with so constant and brave a mind, and he indeed seemed to desire it. When he had reached the spot where he was to die, he divested himself of his garments, and knelt in prayer. Logs of wood were then piled about his body, which they covered up to the breast. When they were lighted, he began to sing a hymn, which was interrupted by the smoke and the flames. This, however, is the greatest proof of the constancy of his mind, that when the official wished to light the stake behind his back, that he might not see it, he said, 'Come here and light the stake before my eyes, for if I had feared it I should never have come to this spot, as it was in my power to fly.'

Poggio Bracciolini, the papal representative at the Council of Constance.
(amazingdiscoveries.org)

While his chains rattled, he gave a brilliant address, confessing his regret about what he had done in a weak moment. He emphasised that John Huss had been an upright and righteous man. Clearly and precisely, basing his arguments on God's Word, he refuted every accusation they had made against him. He did not waver, nor hesitate at all.

His words made a tremendous impression! Many wanted to release him. However, the majority demanded his death, and so Jerome of Prague was finally condemned to death.

Just like Huss, they also dressed him in a garment of mockery. They pressed a paper hat, painted with four red devils, on his head. Calmly he told them:

"Jesus wore the crown of thorns. I will gladly wear this crown of mockery." Then the soldiers led him away to be burned. Arriving at the stake, he knelt to pray for the last time. But they even denied him that. Before he had finished praying, the executioner's assistants came and forced him to get up.

They securely tied him to the pile of wood. The executioner wanted to light the fire behind Jerome so he would not see the flames straight away. But the brave martyr cried out:

"That is not necessary! I no longer fear the flames. You are welcome to start the fire in front of me. If I had feared death, I would not be standing here."

After one last prayer for divine assistance, Jerome sang a final hymn and then he was no more.

The Roman clergy thought: 'That's it, that's the end of the heretical ideas in Bohemia.' But if they expected rest and peace to reign in the Hussite countries, they made a big mistake because ...

QUESTIONS

1. Why did a council convene in Constance in 1414?
2. List the main decisions of the council regarding the Great Schism and the doctrines of Wycliffe.

3. Why did Emperor Sigismund want to introduce the matters of Bohemia? What did he promise John Huss?

4. What grounds did the Church use to defend its capture of Huss despite the promise of safe conduct?

5. On what basis would Huss consent to recant? Why did the Church refuse his request?

6. Why did the Roman clergy refuse to allow Huss to speak?

7. What did his persecutors mean when they said, "O accursed Judas, we take from you this cup of salvation"? What did Huss mean when he replied that he would drink this cup in His Kingdom today?

8. What did the bishop mean when he said, 'that the body of sin might be destroyed'?

9. Who was Jerome? Summarise his early background.



Jerome of Prague burned at the stake **Died: 30 May 1416 (aged 36–37)**

<https://www.bestbookus.com/2020/08/letters-of-johnhuss.html>

10. Prove that Jerome had no peace after he recanted until he had acknowledged his sin.
11. When Jerome appeared before the council in May 1416, he reaffirmed his faith. What points did he now admit and defend?
12. How did he react to the crown of mockery placed on his head?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Was the Church's reply to Huss's objection that they did not keep their promise regarding his safe conduct according to Church rules?
2. Why did they first dress Huss as a priest and then take the garments off again?
3. On what basis could the Church refuse to give someone the right to a fair trial?
4. On what basis could Huss say that he would drink 'this cup in His Kingdom today? Where can we find a similar event in God's Word to show that the soul goes immediately to heaven?
5. What is the proper meaning of the text, 'that the body of sin might be destroyed?'
6. Compare the sin and repentance of Jerome and Peter.