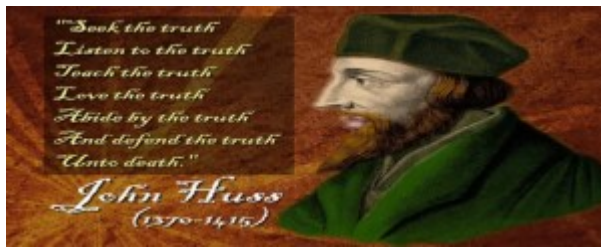


God's Goose – The Story of John Huss



This inspiring account is a re-post from
<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/gods-goose>

The German city of Constance (Konstanz) is one of the most beautiful in Europe. It overlooks the blue-green lake of the same name, and through it flows the mighty Rhine.

It was there, 600 years ago on July 6, 1415, that a thin and very sick man was fastened to a wooden stake by a rusty chain round his neck. Wood and straw were piled up to his chin. He had seen what he called "*this dire, ignominious, and cruel death*" coming for a long time, and now the horror had arrived. Yet when the fire was lit, he sang hymns.

This remarkable man was John Huss (also Jan Hus), a Bohemian by birth. Huss is Czech for goose. Why was he burnt alive, and why should we remember him on the 600th anniversary of his death? The latter question is easy. Looking back at history as God arranged it, **if there had been no John Huss there would have been no Martin Luther. And if there had been no Martin Luther then there would have been no Protestant Reformation and recovery of the gospel.** In God's providence, John Huss takes a critically important place in the history of Jesus' church.

Huss was born in Husinec, Bohemia, in 1369. He was a top student at the University of Prague, and was made a priest in 1400. Huss inherited the church of high medieval Roman

Catholicism: the pope was the supreme authority; the Latin Vulgate was the "right" version of Scripture and other translations were wrong; at the Mass the bread and wine were "transubstantiated" into the actual body and blood of Christ; the work of priests was efficacious no matter their character; and the sale of indulgences – certificates that promised a quicker exit from purgatory – was the pope's approved method for raising money. The church was considered to be more of a physical and organisational structure than the spiritual body of Christ, and justification by faith alone was forgotten.

At university, Huss joyfully discovered the writings of the Englishman John Wycliffe (1320-1384), the "Morning Star of the Reformation". Wycliffe railed against English subordination to the Bishop of Rome, taught that transubstantiation was nonsense, and worked heroically for the translation of the Bible into his native tongue. Huss translated a number of Wycliffe's books into Czech.

In his early 30s, Huss began preaching at Prague's new Bethlehem Chapel. At this time two rival popes, one based in Rome, and the other in Avignon in France, each claimed to be the head of the church. In 1409 the Council of Pisa tried to break the deadlock by appointing a third pope. This fiasco, coupled with the notorious immorality of the senior clergy, severely damaged the church's reputation. Huss did not hold back his criticism, and Prague's masses flocked to hear his merciless attacks on the hierarchy.

The hierarchy counter-attacked. They condemned "Wycliffism", burned the Englishman's books, and ordered his followers to recant. Huss refused, and was excommunicated and banned from preaching. For Huss, this would mean breaking his ordination vows. So he kept preaching, and his popularity grew.

In 1412, John XXIII (one of the three claimants popes) ordered a fresh sale of indulgences to finance his crusade against Naples. Huss was enraged. *"Why does not the pope have refuge in prayer rather than gold or silver!"* His enthusiastic followers burned papal bulls.

The political and religious situation in Europe grew so volatile that Sigismund, King of the Holy Roman Empire, called a general church council in Constance in 1414. Huss went to plead against his excommunication, and though Sigismund promised him safe passage back to Prague, he was soon imprisoned in the dungeon of a Dominican monastery. There he was perpetually cold, hungry, and sick.

Huss was brought to trial before a large gathering of European princes and prelates in June 1415. He knew what the final outcome would be, and quipped bravely, *"The Goose is not afraid to be cooked."*

Against those who accused him for his opposition to indulgences and other papal abuses, he said time and again, *"Show me from God's Word where I am wrong."* And when urged to submit to the authority of the pope, whether he agreed personally or not, he replied, *"I cannot offend against God or my conscience by abjuring."* Biographer David Schaff said that Huss broke new ground by *"contending for the right of the individual conscience in the presence of the open Bible"*.

At each day of trial, the court openly mocked and ridiculed the sick and lonely prisoner, standing against the assembled pomp and might of European power. But he called Jesus his *bellator fortis* – "My Strong Champion" and in prison, pain-wracked, he prayed for Europe, and penned scores of powerful pastoral letters.

On Thursday July 6, 1415, everything was brought to its ghastly conclusion. Huss was ready. *"It is better to die than to live ill. One should not flinch before the sentence of death."* He was mockingly robed as a priest, and then forcibly undressed and degraded. They crowned him with a paper cone bearing the word *Haereticus*: *Head of Heretics*.

He was led to a vacant plot, where one last time he refused to save his life by recanting. *"In the truth of the gospel which I have written, taught, and preached, drawing on the sayings and positions of the holy doctors, I am*

ready to die today.” As the flames consumed him he cried out, “Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us!”

His ashes were shoveled into a wheelbarrow, and tipped into the Rhine.

A famous Czech medallion, cast in 1572, represents John Wycliffe striking sparks with a flint, John Huss lighting a flame, and Martin Luther holding high a blazing torch. This shows exactly where John Huss fits into the history of the church.

As Huss had devoured Tyndale’s books, Luther, as a curious teenager in Erfurt, read the heretic Huss’s sermons, and found himself deeply influenced. After nailing his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg’s Castle Church in 1517, Luther was accused time and again of being one of the loathed “Hussites”. At first he denied this, and said that only some of Huss’s articles were true. But by the time of his own 1521 trial in Worms, he revoked this, and **affirmed that all of Huss’s articles were true, and that in condemning Huss, Constance had condemned the gospel.** Luther’s peroration at Worms very much echoed the defence of Huss a century before:

If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons; if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God’s word, I neither can nor will retract anything. I stand here and can say no more. God help me. Amen.

That’s why we should remember John Huss on the 6th of July. His courage inspired Luther, and his writings taught Luther to bind his conscience to the Word alone. Luther taught that to the world, and, as Protestant believers, we live and stand in that liberating and life-giving truth today.

Take time to thank God for the Goose, the great John Huss.