

The Martyrdom of John Hooper

From Foxe's Book of Martyrs (updated to the 21st Century)

So it was decided that he would remain in Robert Ingram 's house, and the sheriffs, sergeants, and other officers watched over him that night. Hooper asked if he might go to bed early that night, since he had many things to remember, and so he did at five o'clock in the afternoon and slept soundly until late in the night, and then arose and prayed until the early hours. When he got up that morning, he asked that no one come into his room so that he might be alone until the hour of his execution.

About eight o'clock, on February 9, 1555, Sir John Bridges and Lord Chandos, who had many men with him Sir Anthony Kingston, Sir Edmund Bridges, and other commissioners who were appointed to see to the execution-came to the house. At nine o'clock Master Hooper was told to prepare himself, for the time was at hand, and he was immediately brought down from his room by the sheriffs, who had with them several clubs and weapons. When he saw the many weapons, Hooper said to the sheriffs, "Master Sheriffs, I am no traitor, and you have no need to make such a work to take me to the place where I must suffer. If you had told me, I would have gone alone to the stake, and have troubled none of you."

It was a market day in Gloucester, and about seven thousand people had gathered to see how Hooper would behave toward death. He was led between the two sheriffs, like a lamb going to the place of slaughter, in a gown belonging to his host, his hat on his head, and a staff with which to steady himself because sciatica pain resulting from his long stay in prison sometimes caused him to stumble. He smiled cheerfully at all whom he recognized, and many said afterward that they had never known him to be so cheerful and healthy looking as he did then.

When they came to his place of execution, Hooper immediately knelt down to prayer since he was not permitted to talk to the people. After he had prayed for a while, a box was brought and put upon a stool, with, it was said, his pardon from the Queen if he would turn from his beliefs and teachings. When he saw it he cried, "If you love my soul, away with it! If you love my soul, away with it! "

When he finished praying, he went to the stake and took off his host's gown and gave it to the sheriffs, asking them to give it back to the owner. He also took off the rest of his clothes down to his jacket and hose, which he would have burned. But the sheriffs would not permit it, such was their greed, and so Hooper obediently removed his jacket, stockings, and first undergarment, which left him wearing only his undershirt. The guard gave him three sacks of a pound each of gunpowder, and Hooper took back one of his stockings and tied his shirt between his legs to hold one of the sacks, and held the other two in his armpits.

Hooper then asked the people to pray the Lord's Prayer with him, and to pray for him, which they did with much crying while he was suffering. He then went up to the stake and an iron hoop was placed around his chest and the stake to hold him there while he was burning. When they offered to similarly bind his neck and legs with two other hoops of iron, he refused them.

In a few moments, the man who was to make the fire came to him and asked for his forgiveness. Hooper asked the man why he should forgive him, that he knew of no offense that the man had committed against him. "O sir!" the man said, weeping, "I am appointed to make the fire ." Master Hooper replied, "In that you do nothing to offend me. God forgive you your sins, and do your work, I pray you."

Dried reeds for kindling were put around him, and Hooper took two bundles of them, kissed them, and put one under each arm below the sacks of gunpowder. He then motioned with his hand to where he wanted the reeds placed around him and the faggots placed over them, and pointed out the places where there were not enough of one or the other. When he was satisfied with the placement, the fire was set.

But too many green faggots had been used, almost as many as two horses could carry, and it took some time for the reeds to ignite the faggots. Finally the fire burned around him, but it was a dark and cold morning and there was a strong wind that blew the flames away from Hooper so that he was not touched by the fire. After a while, a few dry faggots were brought and a new fire kindled with them, for there were no more reeds that could be used. But the fire only burned underneath the faggots and had no power on the outside because of the wind, so it only burned his hair a little and caused his skin to swell. All this time, Hooper prayed, mildly and quietly, as one without pain, "O Jesus, the Son of David, have mercy upon me, and receive my soul."

When the fire from the dried faggots started to die out without igniting the green faggots, Hooper wiped his eyes with his hands and said, with an indifferent loud voice, "For God's love, good people, let me have more fire!" All this time the lower part of his body was burning, for there were so few dried faggots that the fire did not burn strongly enough to reach his upper body.

After a while, more dried faggots were brought and a third fire kindled that was stronger than the other two. This fire broke the sacks of gunpowder but they did him little good, neither exploding nor increasing his burning because of the strength of the wind that blew the fire away from him. During this slow burning, Hooper prayed in a somewhat loud voice, "Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me. Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." These were the last words he was heard to speak.

But even when his mouth was black and his tongue swollen, his lips could still be seen moving in prayer until they shrunk back into his gums. During these moments, Hooper struck repeatedly at his chest, or heart, with his hands until one of his arms fell off, and then continued striking his chest with the other hand while fat, water, and blood spurted out his fingertips. When the flames suddenly flared up in great power, Hooper struck his chest only once more as his strength gave out and his hand stuck to the iron band around his chest. At the same moment, his body fell forward' against the band and he gave up his spirit.

Hooper was about forty-five minutes to an hour in the fire. Even so he was like a lamb, patiently suffering the agony without moving backwards or forwards or to the sides-he was in agony unbearable except by God's grace, and yet died as quietly as a child in bed. Now he reigns as a blessed martyr in the joys of heaven prepared for the faithful in Christ before the foundations of the world. For his faithfulness, all Christians are bound to praise God.