

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Lesson 27*

### St. Patrick

Are you wearing green? Are you thinking Irish? True, today is not March 17<sup>th</sup>, but that doesn't stop us from what we are about in church history literacy! For us, today is St. Patrick's Day!

We are uncertain of the precise years of St. Patrick's life, but scholars generally date Patrick's birth from as early as 373 up to 389, and his death sometime from 461 to 493. Patrick lived much of his life at the same time as Augustine, subject of our last two lessons.

Many scholars date the "Middle Ages" as beginning during this same time period. If we associate the Roman Empire as the reign and supremacy of Rome, and we place the Middle Ages as the time period following Roman domination, then we place the rising of the Middle Ages at the end of the 300's and the early 400's. It was in the first decade of the 400's that we find barbarian incursions into Italy as far as Rome itself. Around 410, barbarians sacked the city of Rome.

For over a century, the Roman Emperors struggled with the Empire's size and the difficulties of administering a vast kingdom with so many borders. Diocletian attempted to address these issues by dividing the Empire into 4 sections for administration and rule. Constantine restored the Empire to a one-ruler system and used the Christian faith as the mortar to hold the bricks of the empire together.

Constantine also moved the center of government for what we term the "Roman Empire" to Byzantium, also known as "Constantinople." The rule from Constantinople would continue for another 1,000 years, despite what historians consider the "fall of the Roman Empire" and the rise of the "Middle Ages."

For our purposes in this lesson, we need only be aware that the Empire was not growing, nor was it maintaining its borders. We are focusing on years when the Empire's edges were crumbling and the Roman armies were in retreat. Specifically, we need to note that in Britain, an outer borderland of the Empire, the Roman troops withdrew in 410, the year Rome was sacked. This withdrawal left Britain subject to greater attacks and raids by a number of tribes from the north and west (modern Scotland and Ireland).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The barbarians had attacked Roman Britain before the withdrawal of Roman troops. Just a few years before the birth of Patrick, a number of tribes crossed Hadrian's wall (the Northern border of Roman Britain was protected by a wall some 20 feet high built on Hadrian's orders a few hundred

Our materials on St. Patrick come from several sources. We have two writings that scholars agree are authentically Patrick's. One is his *Confession*, and the second is a letter he wrote entitled, *The Epistle to Coroticus*. We will look at both these writings. We will also cover the *Faed Fiada*, or "Deer's Cry," which many authorities on Patrick consider authentic, although some question whether it is genuinely Patrick's. Finally, we shall consider several of the folklore that have arisen around Patrick, even though they have no basis in history.

## BIOGRAPHY

The details we know about Patrick's life come most directly from his own pen in his *Confessions*. There are other writings about his life that date from the next few hundred years after his death; however, it is clear on their face that these writings lack necessary credibility for our purposes. These writings were often written to expand the political prowess of the church structures affiliated with Patrick.

Accordingly, we are uncertain of the date of Patrick's birth. Judging from the facts of his life, we can closely date it around 373-389. Patrick was born in Roman Britain. By that term, we mean the portion of Britain that had been under Roman rule and protection. We suspect that Patrick was born in the northwestern part of Roman Britain near the mouth of the Clyde River.<sup>2</sup>

Patrick's parents were Roman citizens; therefore, so was Patrick. They were also rather wealthy and had possession of at least one country estate along with a number of servants. Patrick's father held a position of authority as a deacon. Patrick's grandfather was a priest.

Patrick himself grew up in a bit of rebellion. He would later write that at barely the age of 16, "I knew not the true God." To the contrary, he had "turned away from God and kept not his commandments...not obedient to our priests who used to admonish us about our salvation" (Conf. 1). Patrick does not give specific details, but we know that his life in ministry was nearly curtailed because of a confession he had made to a friend about a particular sin committed at the age of 15. This confession came out decades later but was still used against his ordination. Recounting the sin, Patrick would write of this sin in childhood, "what I had done one day in my youth, nay in one hour, for I was not yet strong (in virtue). I cannot

---

years earlier and subsequently reinforced by a number of Roman Generals and rulers.) In 360, the Irish from the west, the Saxons from the east, and the Picts from the North simultaneously attacked Roman Britain. This attack was a precursor of things to come.

<sup>2</sup> Healy, *The Life and Writings of St. Patrick*, (1905 Sealy Breyers and Walker) 20ff.

tell – God knows it – if I was then 15 years old, and I did not believe in the living God, nor had I from my infancy” (Conf. 27).

Patrick may have started out an unbeliever, but he would not stay that way! When he was 16, the Irish from the west raided the land again. Thousands of Britons were captured and carted off to slavery in Ireland. Patrick was among those captured. As a slave in Ireland, Patrick was given the chore of shepherding the sheep of his master. Accordingly, Patrick lived mostly outdoors and had a great deal of solitude to think through his life. He was away from his home, his family, and his friends, and he had no idea whether he would ever see any of them again.

Rather than wallow in self-pity. Patrick wrote that his daily reflections centered on his sinfulness and unbelief of his youth. God used this time of persecution and isolation to work in Patrick’s heart and mind:

There the Lord opened the understanding of my unbelief, so that at length I might recall to mind my sins and be converted with all my heart to the Lord my God, who has regarded my humility and taken pity on my youth and my ignorance, and kept watch over me before I knew Him and before I had discretion, or could distinguish good and evil; and He protected me and consoled me as a father does his son (Conf. 2).

Patrick rejoiced that the hardships came as they did because from them he found the “wondrous ways” of God.

Patrick missed out on a great deal of learning and schooling. No doubt, being sold into slavery at 16 prevented a good bit of formal education. But as we read Patrick’s writings, we are struck that over and over Patrick refers to himself as “uneducated,” “untrained,” and weak in language skills. Indeed, the Latin Patrick wrote is *very* rough and difficult to translate.

Patrick’s skills in Latin are more than made up by his skills and understanding of the Bible. Patrick clearly believed in the Trinity. Furthermore, Patrick committed great portions of scripture to memory.

On the Trinity, Patrick would write, “there is no other God...except God the Father unbegotten, without beginning...and His Son Jesus Christ, whom we likewise confess to have always been with the Father...and ineffably of the Father ...and the Holy Spirit... one God in the Trinity” (Conf. 4).

Patrick quotes scripture repeatedly. He gives a great word for word accounting of Paul’s wonderful Philippians discourse on the humility of Christ writing that God gave Jesus all power above every name “so that in the name of Jesus every knee

should bow of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord and God in whom we believe....” Patrick then effortlessly fuses this passage with other scriptures as he continues, “...in whom we believe, and whose coming we expect will soon take place, the Judge of the quick and the dead, who will render to everyone according to his works; and who has poured out on us abundantly the Holy Spirit, the gift and seal of our immortality who makes those who believe and obey become children of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Conf. 4).

It is amazing what one with little to no formal education, along with an obedient heart, can accomplish through an intimate knowledge of God and his word! Here is a man who traversed all of Ireland, baptized thousands upon thousands, set up monasteries and churches, and yet even in his old age, was ashamed at his failure to master language as one who had training and education! “And therefore even today I am ashamed and greatly dread to make known my inexperience, because not being learned I cannot explain it in a few words” (Conf. 11).

As Patrick was shepherding the sheep, he began to pray to God. As he prayed, the love of God started to grow more and more in his heart. Not only the love of God grew, but also awe, respect, and fear grew as well. As Patrick’s prayer life grew, his faith grew and his Spirit was “stirred up” (Conf. 16).

While in slavery, Patrick gave his life to God. Patrick wrote of himself as a stone stuck deep in mud that God lifted, cleaned, and placed into service in God’s building. Patrick challenged those who were educated, those skilled in language, and those who were the wise of his age. They should neither boast nor rest on their skills. Rather, all should “be filled with wonder” at a God who could highly exalt fools such as Patrick and press them into His service. All should serve such a God with great humility! (Conf. 13)

After his conversion, Patrick was sleeping one night when he had a dream/vision telling him that a ship was ready to take him home. He was to leave at once. Patrick left and traveled the 200 miles to the ship. The ship was set to leave the very day Patrick arrived. Patrick asked the ship’s captain for passage, but the captain adamantly refused.

Patrick left the harbor and started praying about the matter while walking away. Before Patrick finished the prayer, one of the ship’s crew came running up to him saying the Captain had changed his mind and Patrick could sail with the ship. During his time with the crew, Patrick was teaching and preaching about Jesus. Before he left, the crew, who started out as unbelieving heathens, were giving thanks to God and honoring Patrick as a man of faith (Conf. 19).

As a young man of 22, Patrick finally made it back to his home and parents. His family was so overjoyed at his homecoming that they pleaded with him to never leave their side. Somehow in the midst of his glorious time back at home, Patrick was given another dream/vision. In this vision, Patrick saw an Irish man who brought him letters to read. While reading the letters, Patrick heard voices begging him to return to Ireland. This dream so touched Patrick that he awoke and was unable to go back to sleep.

Patrick would follow his dream and return to Ireland, but not for a number of years! We do not know the length of time that passed, but Patrick eventually returned to Ireland in God's service to do mission work. In preparation for this work, Patrick set out to be made Bishop. In the process, as noted earlier, a sin he had confessed to committing as a 15 year old boy came back to haunt him! Patrick confessed this sin when he was 30 in preparation for being made a deacon approximately 30 years later. Patrick made the confession to his best friend.

That best friend betrayed Patrick's confession and some used the sin was used to try and deny Patrick his Bishopric. In other words, Patrick committed some sin we do not know about at the age of 15, confessed the sin to his best friend around the age of 30, and had the sin trumpeted by that friend and used against Patrick when Patrick was 60!

How did Patrick respond? While Patrick was no doubt distressed, we read that he had a dream in the night where God gave him comfort and solace. In the dream, God said, "With pain we have seen the face of the bishop designate spoiled of his name." It was very significant to Patrick that God said, "we have seen" instead of "you have seen." Patrick saw that God was with Patrick in this ordeal. God joined himself with Patrick. What touched Patrick also touched God. Patrick felt his faith and virtue confirmed by God and God's approval. Man's shaming took no hold on Patrick in light of God's forgiveness! (Conf 26-30)

It turns out that Patrick's friend was not trying to submarine Patrick's chances. Evidently, the friend was just giving an honest account of what he knew about Patrick. Patrick would later write that he learned the friend actually fought for Patrick's ordination (Conf 32).

Patrick was ordained a bishop, and from this experience he drew several lifelong lessons that helped him in his ministry as well as his personal life. Patrick was a man who lived in constant praise of God. "I constantly exalt and magnify your name wherever I may be, as I will in prosperity as also in adversity; so that whatever befall me, good or bad, I ought to receive with equal mind, and always give thanks to God who showed me that I might to the end put my trust in him as unfailing" (Conf. 34).

Patrick went to Ireland and walked the entire country preaching God and Jesus. As the first real missionary, he brought faith to the island and in many ways was God's tool for its conversion. Although he was an older man when he went, Patrick spent decades teaching and preaching. He was persecuted, beaten, captured, and abused. But, Patrick kept preaching to every one about Jesus and God. He got to see the local chieftains' sons and daughters give their lives in service to God. He found his life a fulfillment to Jesus's call to "Going, therefore, into the whole world, preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believes and is baptized shall be saved; but he that does not believe shall be condemned" (Conf. 40, Mk 16:15-16).<sup>3</sup>

As a missionary, Patrick accepted no payment or gifts from anyone. He was concerned that he might even appear "rude" for his refusal to accept even the "little gifts." Yet, he returned these gifts so that no one might ever question his motives about his work (Conf. 48 – 50). Patrick was happy with a life of poverty. He did not consider himself worthy of anything more! In fact, to Patrick, poverty exceeded riches in the value of a man. "For Christ the Lord was poor for our sake" (Conf. 55).

Patrick supposedly wrote The Faed Fiada, or Deer's Cry, when he and his companions were escaping an ambush during his days as a missionary. It is a brief writing that was to serve as a chant for the Christians in time of fear and challenge. The chant has some beautiful passages that throw those chanting it on the mercies of God. For example,

"I bind to myself today  
The power of God to guide me,  
The might of God to uphold me,  
The wisdom of God to teach me,  
The eye of God to watch over me,  
The ear of God to hear me,  
The word of God to give me speech,  
The hand of God to protect me,  
The way of God to prevent me,  
The shield of God to shelter me,  
The host of God to defend me,  
Against the snares of demons,

---

<sup>3</sup> Scholars reckon that Patrick used an "Old Italian" Latin version of scripture. It was a version that predated the work of Jerome in the early 400's. It is interesting, therefore, that Patrick knew and quoted Mark 16:15-16. Most scholars do not believe that the portion of Mark from 16:9-20 was originally in the Greek copy of Mark. The two oldest Greek manuscripts do not have the verses, nor does the Old Latin "codex Bezae Cantabrigiae." Both Jerome and Eusebius stated that those verses were absent from "almost all Greek copies of Mark known to them" (Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, at 123). Yet, it was part of the scriptures known to Patrick and used by him.

Against the temptations of vices,  
Against the lusts of nature,  
Against every man who mediates injury to me” (Faed 5)

At some time during his mission ministry (likely toward the end), raiding pirates came upon the shores of Ireland and captured a number of “Patrick’s Christians.” With grief and indignation, Patrick wrote a fierce letter to Coroticus, the King of the marauders. Evidently, Coroticus considered himself a Christian, although his actions certainly seemed to belie that idea! Patrick wrote Coroticus a letter sending it by hands of a priest. The priest was to read the letter to Coroticus in the hearing of others and then leave it there. The letter upbraided Coroticus, and urged him and his people to change their lives. It also excommunicated Coroticus! We do not know whether Coroticus changed his life, or for that matter, whether the priest made it back alive!

We do not know for certain how Patrick’s life ended. Patrick was ready for his body to be “most miserably divided limb by limb for the dogs and wild beasts, or that the birds of the air should devour it...because without any doubt we shall rise on that day with the brightness of the sun, that is the glory of Christ Jesus our Redeemer, as sons of the living God and co-heirs with Christ and conformed to His future likeness (Conf. 59).

Interestingly, Patrick was not real excited about writing his confession. He wrote, at least in part, to make sure that the generations to come would know how God was able to work through him for the good of the kingdom. This was to be Patrick’s “legacy to my brethren” after his death so that the Irish might know the power of God and the works of his hands through the most humble and unqualified Patrick (Conf 14).

Many legends have come up about Patrick. Some say he chased all the snakes from Ireland. Some say he used the 3-leaf clover to teach about the Trinity. Some say he was a miracle performer as a child. All these legends have no basis in the historical life of Patrick. There is no question, though, that God used this man as the catalyst to evangelize a people that once robbed him of his life at home, bringing him as a slave to a meeting place with God!

### **POINTS FOR HOME**

1. God can use a little for a lot
2. We are the body of Christ
3. Hardship should draw us to the Father