

Module 112: Patrick

St Patrick's *Confession*. Translated by Ludwig Bieler. Introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“Come and walk among us once more.”

Module Introduction

In 410AD, the world was rocked by the fall of Rome to pagan tribes. The Eastern Empire, based in Constantinople, continued for centuries, but soon the invading tribes had taken over all of Christian Africa and most of Europe. The church survived, but was now again in the missionary business, and over the centuries converted all its pagan conquerors.

Patrick was one of the earliest of the new missionaries, although he devoted his efforts to Ireland which had never been part of the Roman Empire and so had never escaped paganism. He himself was a Briton, brought up as a Christian. In the following excerpts, he tells how he was captured and taken to Ireland as a slave, escaped and then was told by God to return and take the gospel to the Irish. His mission was phenomenally successful in planting the church in Ireland. To this day, Ireland celebrates Patrick as its Patron Saint.

I am Patrick, a sinner, unlearned, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many. My father was Calpornius, a deacon, son of Potitus, a priest, of the village Bannavem Taburniæ; he had a country seat nearby, and there I was taken captive. I was then about sixteen years of age. I did not know the true God. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people - and deservedly so, because we turned away from God, and did not keep His commandments, and did not obey our priests, who used to remind us of our salvation.

And the Lord brought over us the wrath of his anger and scattered us among many nations, even unto the utmost part of the earth, where now my littleness was placed among strangers. And there the Lord opened the sense of

my unbelief that I might at last remember my sins and be converted with all my heart to the Lord my God, who had regard for my abjection, and mercy on my youth and ignorance, and watched over me before I knew Him, and before I was able to distinguish between good and evil, and guarded me, and comforted me as would a father his son. ...

After I came to Ireland - every day I had to tend sheep, and many times a day I prayed - the love of God and His fear came to me more and more, and my faith was strengthened. And my spirit was moved so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night, and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountains; and I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm, and there was no sloth in me - as I now see, because the spirit within me was then fervent. And there one night I heard in my sleep a voice saying to me: `It is well that you fast, soon you will go to your own country.'

And again, after a short while, I heard a voice saying to me: `See, your ship is ready.' And it was not near, but at a distance of perhaps two hundred miles, and I had never been there, nor did I know a living soul there; and then I took to flight, and I left the man with whom I had stayed for six years. And I went in the strength of God who directed my way to my good, and I feared nothing until I came to that ship. And the day that I arrived the ship was set afloat, and I said that I was able to pay for my passage with them. But the captain was not pleased, and with indignation he answered harshly: `It is of no use for you to ask us to go along with us.' And when I heard this, I left them in order to return to the hut where I was staying. And as I went, I began to pray; and before I had ended my prayer, I heard one of them shouting behind me, `Come, hurry, we shall take you on in good faith; make friends with us in whatever way you like.'

And so on that day I refused to suck their breasts [ie.: cringe before them or flatter them] for fear of God, but rather hoped they would come to the faith of Jesus Christ, because they were pagans. And thus I had my way with them, and we set sail at once. And after three days we reached land, and for twenty-eight days we traveled through deserted country. And they lacked food, and hunger overcame them; and the next day the captain said to me: 'Tell me, Christian: you say that your God is great and all-powerful; why, then, do you not pray for us? As you can see, we are suffering from hunger; it is unlikely indeed that we shall ever see a human being again.' I said to them full of confidence: 'Be truly converted with all your heart to the Lord my God, because nothing is impossible for Him, that this day He may send you food on your way until you be satisfied; for He has abundance everywhere.' And, with the help of God, so it came to pass: suddenly a herd of pigs appeared on the road before our eyes, and they killed many of them; and there they stopped for two nights and fully recovered their strength, and their hounds received their fill for many of them had grown weak and were half-dead along the way. And from that day they had plenty of food.

They also found wild honey, and offered some of it to me, and one of them said: "This we offer in sacrifice." Thanks be to God, I tasted none of it. That same night, when I was asleep, Satan assailed me violently, a thing I shall remember as long as I shall be in this body. And he fell upon me like a huge rock, and I could not stir a limb. But whence came it into my mind, ignorant as I am, to call upon Helias [Elijah? Jesus as the "sun" of God as he affirms him below]? And meanwhile I saw the sun rise in the sky, and while I was shouting "Helias! Helias" with all my might, suddenly the splendor of that sun fell on me and immediately freed me of all misery. And I believe that I was sustained by Christ my Lord, and that His Spirit was even then crying out in my behalf, and I hope it will be so on the day of my tribulation, as is written in the Gospel: "On that day, the

Lord declares, it is not you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaks in you." ...

I was in Britain with my people, who received me as their son, and sincerely besought me that now at last, having suffered so many hardships, I should not leave them and go elsewhere. And there I saw in the night the vision of a man, whose name was Victoricus, coming as it were from Ireland, with countless letters. And he gave me one of them, and I read the opening words of the letter, which were, "The voice of the Irish;" and as I read the beginning of the letter I thought that at the same moment I heard their voice - they were those beside the Wood of Voclut, which is near the Western Sea - and thus did they cry out as with one mouth: "We ask thee, boy, come and walk among us once more." And I was quite broken in heart, and could read no further, and so I woke up. Thanks be to God, after many years the Lord gave to them according to their cry. And another night - whether within me, or beside me, I know not, God knows - they called me most unmistakably with words which I heard but could not understand, except that at the end of the prayer He spoke thus: "He that has laid down His life for thee, it is He that speaks in thee;" and so I awoke full of joy.

...

Now, it would be tedious to give a detailed account of all my labors or even a part of them. Let me tell you briefly how the merciful God often freed me from slavery and from twelve dangers in which my life was at stake - not to mention numerous plots, which I cannot express in words; for I do not want to bore my readers. But God is my witness, who knows all things even before they come to pass, as He used to forewarn even me, poor wretch that I am, of many things by a divine message. How came I by this wisdom, which was not in me, who neither knew the number of my days nor knew what God was? Whence was given to me afterwards the gift so great, so salutary—to know God and to love Him, although at the price of leaving my country and

my parents? ...

How did it come to pass in Ireland that those who never had a knowledge of God, but until now always worshipped idols and things impure, have now been made a people of the Lord, and are called sons of God, that the sons and daughters of the kings of the Irish are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ? Among others, a blessed Irishwoman of noble birth, beautiful, full-grown, whom I had baptized, came to us after some days for a particular reason: she told us that she had received a message from a messenger of God, and he admonished her to be a virgin of Christ and draw near to God. Thanks be to God, on the sixth day after this she most laudably and eagerly chose what all virgins of Christ do. Not that their fathers agree with them: no - they often ever suffer persecution and undeserved reproaches from their parents; and yet their number is ever increasing. How many have been reborn there so as to be of our kind, I do not know - not to mention widows and those who practice continence.

But greatest is the suffering of those women who live in slavery. All the time they have to endure terror and threats. But the Lord gave His grace to many of His maidens; for, though they are forbidden to do so, they follow Him bravely. Wherefore, then, even if I wished to leave them and go to Britain - and how I would have loved to go to my country and my parents, and also to Gaul in order to visit the brethren and to see the face of the saints of my Lord! God knows it! that I much desired it; but I am bound by the Spirit, who gives evidence against me if I do this, telling me that I shall be guilty; and I am afraid of losing the labor which I have begun - nay, not I, but Christ the Lord who bade me come here and stay with them for the rest of my life, if the Lord will, and will guard me from every evil way that I may not sin before Him. ...

May God never permit it to happen to me that I should lose

His people which He purchased in the utmost parts of the world. I pray to God to give me perseverance and to deign that I be a faithful witness to Him to the end of my life for my God. And if ever I have done any good for my God whom I love, I beg Him to grant me that I may shed my blood with those exiles and captives for His name, even though I should be denied a grave, or my body be woefully torn to pieces limb by limb by hounds or wild beasts, or the fowls of the air devour it. I am firmly convinced that if this should happen to me, I would have gained my soul together with my body, because on that day without doubt we shall rise in the brightness of the sun, that is, in the glory of Christ Jesus our Redeemer, as sons of the living God and joint heirs with Christ, to be made conformable to His image; for of Him, and by Him, and in Him we shall reign. For this sun which we see rises daily for us because He commands so, but it will never reign, nor will its splendor last; what is more, those wretches who adore it will be miserably punished. Not so we, who believe in, and worship, the true sun—Christ—who will never perish, nor will he who does His will; but he will abide for ever as Christ abides for ever, who reigns with God the Father Almighty and the Holy Spirit before time, and now, and in all eternity. Amen.

Behold, again and again would I set forth the words of my confession. I testify in truth and in joy of heart before God and His holy angels that I never had any reason except the Gospel and its promises why I should ever return to the people from whom once before I barely escaped. I pray those who believe and fear God, whosoever deigns to look at or receive this writing which Patrick, a sinner, unlearned, has composed in Ireland, that no one should ever say that it was my ignorance if I did or showed forth anything however small according to God's good pleasure; but let this be your conclusion and let it so be thought, that—as is the perfect truth—it was the gift of God. This is my confession before I die.

Discussion Starters:

1. What made Patrick return to his childhood faith?
2. How did he return to Britain? What happened once he was there? What do make of this story?
3. What made Patrick return to Ireland? What do imagine this was like for him? What made him keep at it?
- 4 . Why according to Patrick were things particularly difficult for female Christians?
5. What is Patrick's attitude to martyrdom? How does this compare to earlier attitudes such as Polycarp's and Tertullian's?
6. What can we learn today and what can we gain from Patrick's story?

Bible verses

Matthew 10:5-20

2 Corinthians 11:18-33, 12:10

Acts 22:2-21

Mark 16:14-18