

♣ Patrick, Missionary to Ireland ♣

As Attila the Hun prepared his first attack on Roman provinces and Augustine secluded himself in his study writing *The City of God*, Patrick's parents worried about their son. At almost 16 years old, he hadn't professed faith in Christ, even though his father Calpornius was a deacon and his grandfather Potitus was a pastor in the church. Something of a rebel, Patrick had already committed a serious sin that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

One night shortly before his 16th birthday, Patrick stayed at his father's country estate in Britain with the household servants while his parents traveled to a nearby town on business. While everyone slept, a party of Irish slave traders surrounded the estate. All the able-bodied members of the household were kidnapped, bound with chains and loaded into boats to be transported to Ireland. Those who resisted were killed outright.

After a two-day journey in an open boat, chained to the other captives, Patrick was sold to a farmer and given the menial task of watching the sheep. Three days before he had been a nobleman's son commanding slaves, now he was a slave. Patrick wrote about this time in his *Confession*:

But it was here in Ireland that God first opened my heart, so that—even though it was a late start—I became aware of my failings and began to turn with my whole heart to the Lord my God. For He looked down on my miserable condition and had compassion for me, young and foolish as I was. He cared for me even before I knew who He was, before I could tell the difference between right and wrong. He protected me and loved me even as a father does his own child.¹

Patrick prayed constantly during these years, alone with the sheep, and remembered the Godly teaching of his parents and his pastor. Patrick also learned to speak the language of the Irish people, gradually learning their customs and about the gods they worshipped. In learning to protect and care for the sheep, Patrick was for the first time forced to think of something other than his own selfish desires. Patrick said:

God used the time to shape and mold me into something better. He made me into what I am now—someone very different from what I once was, someone who can care about others and work to help them.

After serving as a slave for six years, Patrick twice had a dream in which he heard a voice say, "Your ship is ready." Taking this as a sign from God, Patrick ran away from his owner and traveled "maybe 200 miles" on foot as a fugitive. Patrick was utterly alone for weeks and yet said he was never afraid until he came to the port city. There, he summoned up his courage and asked a ship's captain if he might sail with them to Britain as a member of the crew. The Captain initially refused his request, but as Patrick breathed a prayer for guidance, the officer changed his mind. Patrick was going home.

Can you imagine the celebration as Patrick walked into the courtyard of his home in Britain? The son they had thought twice lost, both to this world and the next, was twice found. Patrick said, "They took me in—their long-lost son—and begged me earnestly that after all I had been through I would never leave them again."

We know little about the next few years of Patrick's life—how long he stayed at home or what plans his parents had for his future. We do know that as a result of a series of dreams, Patrick was convinced that God wanted him to return to Ireland as a missionary. Patrick's parents would lose him yet again.

After receiving the proper training and the blessing of the church, Patrick obeyed God and returned to the land of his captivity, preaching among the people there for the next 40 years. Thousands of people came to know Christ and the church in Ireland was established. In *Confession*, a letter Patrick wrote late in his life, he said:

My final prayer is that all of you who believe in God and respect Him—whoever you may be who read this letter that Patrick the unlearned sinner wrote from Ireland—that none of you will ever say that I in my ignorance did anything for God. You must understand—because it is the truth—that it was all the gift of God.

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¹ Quotes from Patrick's *Confession* were taken from the translation of Philip Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland* (Simon and Schuster, 2004), pages 176-193.