

Patrick- Missionary to Ireland

Rev. A. Lanning

Patrick's life reads like an adventure story, with chapters on pirates, kidnapping, foreign lands and languages, slavery, prophetic dreams, a daring escape over land and sea, a shocking return to the pagan barbarians, druids, leprechauns and fairies, and war. By the time he was 16, Patrick had had more real life adventures than most of us hope to have in a lifetime.

Underlying Patrick's personal adventures is the more important story of how God used Patrick as a missionary to bring the gospel to Ireland, and from Ireland to many other places in Britain and Europe. The mission work of Patrick was one fulfillment of God's promise in Psalm 67:7, "God shall bless us; and all the ends of the earth shall fear him."

Patrick's life is instructive for all Christians, but Patrick's story is especially gripping for young people because Patrick's adventures began when he was still in his teens. As you read on, imagine what it would have been like to be Patrick, subjected to these great struggles, and learn from his response how to endure the lesser or greater struggles that God may send into your life.

Patrick's story begins on the western coast of the island of Britain, sometime around 389 AD. At that time Britain was ruled by the Roman Empire, which had sent its soldiers into Britain centuries earlier. The Roman soldiers had brought the Christian faith with them, so that by the time of Patrick's birth the island was at least nominally Christian. Patrick's father was a deacon in the church and his grandfather was a priest, so Patrick was raised in a Christian home. However, Patrick took his Christian home for granted. He was lazy in his studies and did not take his faith to heart. Later, when Patrick looked back on this time of his life, he concluded with shame that he was an unbeliever as a child. Young Patrick was about to learn the folly of his wasted youth, as God prepared to take his precious Christian home away from him.

Covenant youth, mark the value of your Christian home. Like Patrick, we are not always as sensible of this great gift as we should be. Sometimes we simply become so used to having a Christian home that we forget how rare a thing it really is. After all, a Christian home is the only kind of home we have ever known. All our friends are in Christian homes. Everyone at church has a Christian home. It seems to us that Christian homes are the rule. But look beyond the walls of your home and see that what you have is a rarity in the world. Asia has the most populous

countries in the world, and therefore has by far the most families and homes. But these houses overflow with idols to a host of Chinese and Hindu gods. Turn to the Middle East, and you find the families in their homes bowing down to Mecca five times a day in worship of the false god Allah. Turn even to the Western nations in Europe, Australia, and North America that have traditionally been Christian, and you find homes ruled by the unholy trinity of pleasure in unrighteousness, abounding iniquity, and open hostility to God's law, where man has made himself god. What you have in your covenant homes, young people, compared with the rest of the world, is a precious and rare gift of God. Do not take the gift for granted; certainly do not spurn the gift, but treasure it as a token of God's love and be grateful.

When Patrick was 16 years old, God took him away from his covenant home and brought him to the pagan island of Ireland. Although the Roman Empire had subjugated much of the island of Britain, that was the limit of its reach. Across the Irish Sea lay the unconquered island of Ireland. There the people remained untouched by Roman law and order. They worshiped the ancient Celtic gods of earth and stone, sky and water, and believed in magical realms populated by leprechauns and fairies. The druids were the priests of this Celtic paganism, and they were suspected of practicing dark magic, including human sacrifice.

Occasionally pirate raiders from Ireland crossed the sea to Britain to slave and to steal. One day the raiders came to Patrick's home, enslaved him, and carried him back to Ireland. He was sold to a farmer and spent his days and nights tending the man's cattle, without adequate shelter in the wet, cold weather. Patrick was intensely lonely, living against his will in a strange land, separated from his family and all whom he loved. But God was using Patrick's suffering to prepare him for a life of mission work. Patrick picked up the Irish language, as well as the customs and ways of the Irish people. More importantly, in the fields of Ireland God converted Patrick from his childhood unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. In his deep anguish, Patrick cast himself upon the Lord, praying 100 times a day and almost as many times each night. Patrick was filled with devotion to God out of a sense of his great spiritual need.

Patrick's fervent devotion is an example for covenant young people today. In his sovereign providence, God sometimes brings young people into great affliction, as he did Patrick. Isaiah 40:30 teaches us, "Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall." Although you may be in the prime of your physical strength as youth, all human strength is vain, so that even youths can suffer greatly. In your deep need, you must cast

yourself upon God. As Isaiah 40:31 puts it, you must “wait upon the LORD.” Turn to him in prayer as often as the need is felt! 100 times a day! Turn to his word and memorize uplifting passages, so that your mind is stayed on God. Just as God lifted Patrick in his grace, so God will lift you. He has promised it! “But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

Finally, after six years of slavery in Ireland, Patrick found an opportunity to escape. He fled overland to the coast, where he found a ship willing to carry him back to Britain. All told, he traveled over 200 miles to reach his home. Once he arrived, he resumed his education in earnest. As hard as he studied, he always felt that he was behind in his learning. Yet by God’s grace, Patrick was no longer a careless, lazy, immature youth, but a godly, mature young man.

In his growth to Christian maturity, Patrick is an example for covenant youth. God still calls the young people of the church to reach for spiritual maturity. God uses the means of your Christian homes, your Christian education in a Christian school, your godly friends, your life in the world but not of the world, your work, and all the circumstances of your life to bring you to this spiritual maturity. The primary means God uses in your maturing is his word. In 2 Timothy 3:14–17, Paul told Timothy that the holy scriptures “are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” He says that “all scripture ... is profitable... for instruction...that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” Therefore, Timothy – and we – are to “continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of.” Timothy grew to spiritual maturity through the word; Patrick grew to spiritual maturity through the word; and we must grow to spiritual maturity through the word.

After several years in his home, Patrick became convinced that he must return to Ireland as a missionary. Although his six years a slave in Ireland had been miserable, Patrick’s heart was now burdened with the need to bring the gospel to the Irish people. Interestingly, God used the means of special dreams to guide Patrick’s decisions. One night he dreamed that a man from Ireland handed him a letter that was entitled, “The Cry of the Irish.” As he read the letter in his dream, he heard the Irish people crying out to him, “Holy boy, we are asking you to come and walk among us again.” This was not the first time that Patrick had been guided by a dream, for his escape from slavery had also been prompted by a dream.

In his reliance on dreams Patrick is not an example for covenant youth. Patrick lived among superstitious people, so it is not entirely surprising that Patrick himself would be influenced by some superstition. Nevertheless, taking our dreams as revelations from God is superstition. God guides us by his word and the application of the principles of his word to our life. God uses our circumstances to open and close doors. God uses prayer as a means of subjecting our will to his will. But God does not use dreams to tell us what to do. In this Patrick was mistaken, although God sovereignly used even Patrick's superstition to accomplish his purpose. Young people, look to the scriptures for your guidance, not to your dreams.

When Patrick was forty years old, he was ordained as a bishop by the church in Britain and sent to Ireland as a missionary. Preaching was his main labor, but he had many other responsibilities as well. He baptized, trained, and ordained bishops (elders), established monasteries, and traveled far and wide in Ireland to bring the gospel. Patrick recognized the need for hard work, and consciously labored diligently in his calling. At the same time, he attributed all of the fruit of his work and the hard work itself to God.

Patrick and the Irish church suffered persecution as a result of their faith in Jesus Christ. As it turned out, the Britons were just as capable of piracy as the Irish had been. A Briton named Coroticus led a band of soldiers into Ireland in order to kill, capture, and enslave some of the newly converted Christians. Patrick wrote a letter condemning Coroticus' actions, pronouncing God's judgment on his barbaric act, and excommunicating him from the church. Patrick himself was insulted and reproached throughout his mission work, and on at least one occasion he was cast into prison. Rather than abandon the gospel, this persecution made Patrick and the Irish church all the more zealous for the truth.

The fruit of Patrick's mission work, under God's blessing, was that many people were converted from Celtic paganism. Patrick himself spoke of thousands of converts, including some influential members of Irish society. The Roman Catholic Church perpetuates the idea that Patrick converted all of the kings and chieftains of the Irish tribes, but this is most likely a myth. However, it is true that many churches were established, elders were ordained, pastors were taught and sent out, and the true gospel of salvation through Christ alone was proclaimed in Ireland.

Through Patrick's labors, paganism began to decline in Ireland as many people left behind their pagan gods and believed in the one true God. Human sacrifice was almost entirely eradicated, and the slave trade between Ireland and Britain came to a halt.

God used the conversion of the Irish to preserve the gospel for Europe. The Roman Empire was in severe decline, and the pagan barbarians were driving Christianity out of the European lands that were formerly under Roman control. However, in Ireland the knowledge of the scriptures was preserved, as well as the disciplines necessary to understand the scriptures, such as reading, writing, and logical thinking. The churches and monasteries established by Patrick were the centers from which the gospel would return to Europe.

Yes, Patrick's life reads like an adventure story, and there are many lessons to learn from it. As God's covenant youth, let us continue in the faith of our spiritual fathers, for God's glory.

Originally Published in:

Vol 75 No 5 May 2016