

The Irish Apostle

Most people don't know St. Patrick had a vibrant charismatic faith that blazed across Ireland in the fifth century.

Hidden within a small cemetery adjacent to Down Cathedral in Downpatrick, Northern Ireland, is the final resting place of Ireland's patron saint. At first glance it is quite unremarkable, identifiable only by the large granite rock atop it with the single inscription: "Patrick." Here in quiet simplicity lie the earthly remains of the slave boy who rose from the ruins of captivity to become the apostle to the Irish. He shaped the destiny of a nation that would change the entire European continent.

Like grass growing over a long-unused path, time has concealed the trace of his footsteps, and little is remembered of this remarkable man of God even though the date of his death, March 17, is celebrated worldwide as St. Patrick's Day.

Much of what happens at the celebrations has little to do with Patrick himself. Green beer and parades, no matter how well-intentioned, do not reflect his life and legacy. However, his writings—particularly his Confession and his Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus—provide us with an accurate picture of his life.

Patrick was born into the volatile world of the late fourth century. The Roman Empire was beginning to collapse, and there was great upheaval.

Trouble began in A.D. 376 when the Huns forced huge numbers of Goths across the Danube River into Roman territory. In A.D. 406 and 407, the Vandals spilled across the Rhine, plundering

Gaul and Spain, and in A.D. 409, they forced the last Roman legions to leave Britain. In the following year, Rome itself was sacked.

Convulsions continued until A.D. 476, when the Western Empire disappeared and Europe was plunged into the Dark Ages.

Beyond the dying empire lay Ireland. The inhabitants were, to the Roman mind, as dangerous and unpredictable as the terrain. But it was this land of menacing beauty that God chose to ignite and to spread the flame of renewal across the ravaged lands of Europe, using Patrick as His vessel.

Born of Roman nobility, Patrick lived on an estate at Bannavem Taburniae—possibly in the Severn Estuary near Bristol. With the gradual departure of the Roman legions, the unprotected coastal regions were targeted by the Irish, who plundered and kidnapped at will, and around A.D. 400 Patrick was taken. He wrote in his Confessions: “When I was aged about 16, I knew not the One True God. I was captured and brought to Ireland with many thousands of people.”

His comment suggests that there was an invasion. It was a brutal experience. People were caught, beaten, chained and brought back as slaves.

Patrick’s last memory of his homeland may have been of burning, smoke and the anguished cries of those wrenched from home and loved ones. His privileged upbringing left him unprepared for a hard life as a slave.

Celtic Ireland was thoroughly pagan at that time, controlled by superstition and omens. Its gods and goddesses were the

material of horror stories. This tribal society was ruled by warriors in a place of forests and bogs, far removed from the cultured life Patrick had known.

Differences in language added to his loneliness and isolation. A slave's existence was so austere that life expectancy was little more than 30 years. A fitted iron collar made runaways easy to identify, and those recaptured faced certain death.

Many became bitter and full of self-pity. But Patrick responded differently. He acknowledged that God had allowed his trial for a higher good, and tiny shafts of light began to pierce the darkness.

He wrote: "We had turned from God, not keeping His laws nor heeding His servants who declared to us His salvation. It was the Lord's doing that He might reveal to me my unbelief that I should turn from my sins and be converted."

Patrick was sold to Miliuc, a chieftain of the region of Mount Slemish, County Antrim, where for six years he tended sheep and pigs. On the unforgiving mountain slopes and foothills God began working in the young slave.

He recalled: "Praying throughout each day, the love and fear of God increased within me and my faith was strengthened. And being moved in Spirit upon the mountains and in the woods, I prayed up to one hundred times in the day and as much at night. Arising to pray a great while before day, whether in snow or frost or rain, I experienced no ill effects or laziness as the Spirit was strong within me then."

Slemish became the anvil upon which this man of God was

fashioned. Hidden in the Irish hills, strengthened in suffering, praying almost half a million prayers by the end of his captivity, Patrick was molded by God.

In captivity, Patrick developed inner strength and intimacy with God. After six years, he heard a voice in his sleep, "Your ship is ready." He journeyed 200 miles to Wexford and found a ship sailing to Gaul. As a fugitive he was in mortal danger but testified, "I was afraid of nothing." At first he was refused passage aboard the ship, but after praying he was suddenly summoned and invited to board.

Three days later the ship and passengers reached Amorica (Brittany). An invasion by the Vandals on New Year's night A.D. 407 had left the area desolate. With no food, the group journeyed inland for 28 days in danger of starvation.

The ship's captain challenged Patrick: "Answer me this, Christian, you tell us your God is great and all powerful, why will you not pray for us? We perish from hunger and may see no living soul again."

This was a public test of his faith. Would the God he claimed to serve show Himself and answer prayer?

Well done is better than well said. Patrick responded, "Boldly I told them, 'Turn to the Lord my God with your whole heart, for with Him nothing is impossible, that today He may supply you with more than enough food for your journey for He has ample store everywhere.' And so with God's aid it came to pass; at once a herd of swine appeared before us right in front of our eyes. Killing many, they camped two nights regaining their strength. Even their dogs which had become

weak and lifeless were satisfied.”

Pursuing God's Plan

When Patrick returned to Britain, his family pleaded with him not to leave them again. But he received a night vision of a man who seemed to be calling him back to Ireland.

“His name was Victoricus as if he were coming from Ireland with innumerable letters,” Patrick wrote. “He passed one to me, and I read the beginning of the letter, which said: ‘The voice of the Irish.’ As I read those words, I perceived that I heard their words at the same time—they were of those beside the Wood of Voclut, beside the Western Sea.

“Their cry was with one voice, ‘Holy Boy, we ask you to come and walk among us again.’ Thank God after many years He granted their request.”

This was Patrick's Macedonian call. Two similar experiences followed, leaving Him with a difficult choice: to obey God and return to the land of his captivity, never to see his family again, or to remain in Britain and forsake the call of God.

Remembering that disobedience in his youth had cost him his freedom, Patrick decided to leave. He traveled to the continent and trained for holy orders. Several sites have been suggested as the place he studied—Gaul, Italy, Lerins (now St. Honorat, just off Cannes and Monaco) and Auxierre, 100 miles east of Orleans, from which he departed for his Irish mission.

In A.D. 431 Bishop Germanus, Patrick's superior at Auxierre,

planned to send a bishop to Ireland. Patrick hoped he would be chosen—but he was rejected for two reasons: First, he was considered too rustic (his captivity at 16 had affected his education and social skills), and second, he had confessed to a friend a serious sin he committed at 15 (possibly that of killing someone).

The news of his rejection was devastating. More than 20 years had passed since Patrick had left Ireland, and nothing had dimmed his passion to return as God's messenger.

It seemed a mortal blow. Had he not had the divine visitations? Had he not left his family for this? He wrote, "On that day I was struck so that I might have fallen, now and for eternity."

But Patrick submitted, and a man named Palladius was sent instead. Not long afterward, Palladius died, and Germanus reluctantly sent Patrick to replace him. His arrival in Ireland opened the door to one of the finest chapters in Christian history.

In A.D. 432 Patrick landed at Strangford Lough, near Downpatrick, Northern Ireland, and began to target influential people. His first convert was a chieftain named Dichu who gave Patrick a barn as his first church in Saul. Today a beautiful stone church stands on the site, and those who visit tell of the deep peace and presence of God that abides there.

Patrick faced perils daily. "Every day I anticipate the prospect of being killed, cheated, or enslavement, but I am not afraid of any of these things because of His promises," he wrote.

Tempted to return to Britain, he continued to persevere: "Even if it were my wish to depart and return to Britain, for how much I have desired to see my country and my parents ... the Spirit binds me and testifies ... that I would be wrong to leave, for I fear losing the fruits of my labour, or rather Christ's, who beckoned me come and remain with them to the end of my days."

Love for his flock, obedience to the call and a sense of eternal reward were guiding principles for Patrick, who was convinced that greater riches than the treasures of earth awaited him. He remained faithful until death parted him from his harvest field on March 17, A.D. 461.

Biographers from the seventh to the 12th century embellished Patrick's story with fantastic tales of supernatural encounters. Much of what they wrote is exaggerated, but we should not altogether reject the idea that manifestations of divine power attended Patrick's ministry. Ireland was dominated by the Druids, who influenced the population through occultic power, superstition and fear, and it is unlikely that the Irish would have forsaken the old ways in favor of their new faith unless the power of it could be proved.

By the time of his death, Patrick had laid the foundation of Christianity in pagan Ireland with the conversion and baptism of many thousands of men and women, in a land of only a half-million people. In the following centuries, Irish missionaries swarmed like bees over the European continent, spreading the gospel and establishing monasteries as centers of worship and learning during the "golden age" of Celtic Christianity. From the seed of Patrick's life sprang forests of Christianity in the barren soils of Europe.

Kevin Sambrook and his wife, Rosemary, are pastors of Covenant Love Church in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and directors of Rhema Restoration Ministries ([rrm-usa .org](http://rrm-usa.org)). Kevin recently released Chosen, an intercessory prayer CD based on the life of St. Patrick.