

Saint Patrick: An Essay on His Life and Thought.

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As if to inaugurate the arrival of spring, March 17th is greeted with festive parades, something green to wear and toasts of green beer honoring Saint Patrick's driving the snakes out of Ireland. People of all nationalities, not only the Irish, celebrate Saint Patrick's Day.

Although the dates are somewhat obscure, historians agree that Patrick was born in Roman Britain probably in 382 and died in Ireland most likely in 461 but possibly as late as 476. Patrick's "Confession" contains autobiographical accounts of his capture in Scotland by Irish raiders at age sixteen, of his being sold into slavery, of his days as a sheep herder, and of his conversion to Jesus Christ. It traces God's providential care through his escape from slavery in Ireland, his reunion with his family in Britain, his ordination as a deacon in the Celtic Church, his call to take the Gospel to Ireland, and the subsequent resistance and endangerments from the Druid priests. With such a remarkable life, it is a shame that so little is known of Saint Patrick and his message. (All quotes of Saint Patrick are from his autobiographical work, *The Confession of Saint Patrick*.)

PATRICK'S SENSE OF UNWORTHINESS

"I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Matthew 9:13

Patrick is not a downtrodden spirit with a self-esteem problem, but he is a humble man, aware of his low estimate among men and his sinfulness before God. His Confession begins, "I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many." Patrick admits that when he was captured, he "did know the true God." Patrick saw his spiritual condition before conversion as a state of death. "...I did not believe in the living God, nor did I so from my childhood, but lived in death and unbelief." He continues, "I was taken into captivity to Ireland...and deservedly so, because we turned away from God....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." There is joy in Patrick despite being sold into slavery, because through it he was converted with his whole heart to faith in Jesus Christ.

PATRICK'S DEPENDENCE UPON GOD

"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation." 2 Corinthians 7:10

Patrick's sense of sin did not lead to despair, but brought him to dependence upon God. He realized that the answer to his unworthiness before God was not found within himself. "I must not, however, hide God's gift which He bestowed upon me in the land of my captivity; because then I earnestly sought Him, and there I found Him, and He saved me from all evil because, so I believe, of His Spirit that dwells in me." Patrick understood that "...we all, without exception, shall have to give an account even of our smallest sins before the judgment seat of the Lord Christ...Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall render an account for it on the day of judgment." Patrick saw that no one can render an acceptable account before the judgment seat of the Lord. God alone provides deliverance through His Son, Jesus Christ, in the day of judgment. Patrick recalls Psalm 50:15, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you and you shall glorify Me." Patrick's salvation begins and ends with Jesus Christ, "...so that today I can confidently offer Him my soul as a living sacrifice - to Christ my Lord, who saved me out of all my troubles."

PATRICK'S ZEAL TO EVANGELIZE IRELAND

“Going therefore now, teach all nations...” Matthew 28:19

After returning to Britain, Patrick attended seminary and was eventually ordained a deacon in the Celtic Church. One night, Patrick had a dream. "And there I saw in the night the vision of a man, whose name was Victoricus, coming from Ireland, with countless letters. And he gave me one of them, and I read the opening words of the letter...'We ask thee, boy, come and walk among us once more.' And I was quite broken in heart, and could read no further..." Patrick saw the dream as his Macedonian call to return to Ireland and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Patrick believed God was directing his steps to the shores of Ireland once again, but for a definite purpose with undeniable promises.

"...I wish to wait for His promise...as He promises in the Gospel: 'They shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob' - as we believe the faithful will come from all the world. For that reason, therefore, we ought to fish well and diligently, as the Lord exhorts in advance and teaches, saying: 'Come ye after Me, and I will make you to be fishers of men'...Hence it was most necessary to spread our nets so that a great multitude and throng might be caught for God."

Evangelizing Ireland was no small thing in 432. The Irish "religion was an animistic polytheism, which worshipped sun and moon and diverse natural objects, and peopled a thousand spots in Ireland with fairies, demons, and elves. A priestly clan of Druids practiced divination,...and sacrificed to the gods from altars in the open air...the first born child in every family." (*The Story of Civilization*, Vol. 4, pg. 83 Will Durant.)

Not only were the native prospects unpromising, but Patrick encountered resistance to his decision to go to Ireland from family, friend and church leaders. Patrick would not be dissuaded. "In the light, therefore, of our faith in the Trinity I must make this choice, regardless of the danger, I must make known the gift of God and everlasting consolation, without fear and frankly I must spread everywhere the name of God." Patrick became the Apostle to Ireland. God wonderfully blessed Patrick's efforts and the gospel of Jesus Christ began to free Irishmen everywhere from their bondage to the pantheism of the Druids. Will Durant, no friend of Christianity, says this of Patrick's impact on Ireland: "He ordained priests, built churches, established monasteries...and left strong spiritual garrisons to guard his conquests at every turn. He made it seem a supreme adventure to enter the ecclesiastical state; he gathered about him men and women of courage and devotion, who endured every deprivation to spread the good news...He did not convert all of Ireland...but when he died it could be said of him, as of no other, that one man had converted a nation." (ibid, pg. 84)

PATRICK'S MOTIVATION

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”
Romans 5:1

What was Patrick's motivation? "...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." Who motivated Patrick to go? "With the grace of the Lord, I did everything lovingly and gladly for [Ireland's] salvation."

It was not the "Luck o' the Irish" that enabled Patrick to change the course of history for Ireland. It was the sovereign power of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that emboldened Patrick to "...cast down imaginations and everything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:5) Patrick did, in a very real sense, drive the snakes out of Ireland. For in bringing the life-giving message of Jesus Christ to the Irish people, Patrick drove that old Serpent Satan, and his servants, the Druid priests into the sea. Patrick, once

a slave, brought freedom to his former slave masters by leading them into bond service to Christ. Patrick's message is still relevant to us today because it is the message of the Word of God, of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we would truly celebrate Saint Patrick's Day, we should not garnish his tomb and ignore his message. We would find ourselves, as Patrick did, turning in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ to be delivered from our own captivity to sin.

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