

## **“Everything Old is New Again”**

(St. Patrick – Part 2)

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This is the second of a three-week sermon series on St. Patrick. Last week we talked about how St. Patrick wasn't even Irish – he was British. How he was a spoiled little boy right up to the age of 15. He didn't even believe in the God of his family; his family was Christian in Britain, but he had turned away from it. At 15, he committed a grievous sin that, to this day, we don't know what it was – it might have been sexual; it might have been something that related to idolatry in some manner; could even have been murder, for all we know.

Then, all of a sudden, later in his 15th year, pirates from Ireland came. They shackled him by the neck, along with a number of the slaves, and dragged him to Ireland; and there, for six long years, he was a slave to a farmer. By his [Patrick's] 21st birthday, a vision came from God that told him to go home. In his dreams, he was told how to get back all the way to Britain. It had never been done before. No one had ever survived trying to get back to Britain after they had been enslaved in Ireland (this was at the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th century), but Patrick did.

Now, our story continues: Patrick walked into his home, a minor celebrity to everyone in the area. As I said, no one had ever made it home before, and now, all of a sudden, here was Patrick standing at the door.

I'm sure his family had to do a triple-take. They had already done the funeral for him, without his body – because they were sure he was dead – and there he stood; no longer 15 and a weak little boy, but 21 and very strong and big, because he had worked at hard labor for the last six years. His parents begged him to never leave them again. He was an only child, we assume, because we never heard a thing about sisters or brothers and, as an only child, we can see why the parents would hold onto him. They lost him once; they were never going to do that again. They were getting older. They had a farm. They had harvesting. He had all of these things to do – to administrate – to take care of his parents when they were older, to take care of the slaves that the rich family had on their estate.

Just think how odd that would be for Patrick, after having been a slave himself for six years, to figure out what to do with his family's slaves. But Patrick thought he would settle in, take care of his family, and do what God instructed. Yet, just like when he was sitting in Ireland – a slave – the same thing happened to him in his sleep, upon his return to Ireland: he received a vision in his dreams.

The first vision was this strange vision (we have all had these strange dreams), of a man carrying a load of letters so big; he is trying to carry them and, all of a sudden, he just drops them at Patrick's feet. His name was Victorious. And, Victorious grabbed one of the letters off the top, broke the seal, rolled it out, stuck it in Patrick's face and asked him to read it.

So Patrick looked at it, and he read it. In his dream, it said, “The Voice of Ireland.” Patrick rolled it up and in that moment, as he is rolling it up, he hears the entire angelic Heavenly Host singing, “Holy boy, holy boy.”

“Holy boy,” (if you were here last week), was what the slaves called Patrick, when they were all sleeping together in this one big room, where the slaves were kept – because once he found God, he would say a hundred prayers in the morning and he would say a hundred prayers at night. And, if you lived in the late 300s and early 400 A.D., you didn’t say prayers in quiet – you said them out loud. So he must have driven the other slaves nuts when they were trying to sleep. So they started calling him “Holy boy.” The only one who would have known that in Britain was God; so he knew that this was from God. Then the voices of the heavenly chorus continued, “Come walk with us. Come walk with us.”

Patrick woke himself up. He didn’t want to hear any more visions. What in the world were they trying to say? Then the next night he went to bed, and this time the vision was even stranger, because he couldn’t quite understand it. But, he felt so amazingly good. The chorus sang again in words he couldn’t understand, so it wasn’t the words, but it was the feeling – it felt so holy and reverent.

He woke himself up again. He wasn’t going to hear of it. What was God thinking? He had spent six years suffering at their hand. He had to get smuggled out, to get all of the way back to Britain. Now, if he would go back, they would certainly kill him, and he would have to leave his parents and all of his responsibility. How much can God ask?

He went to bed again that night and, in the middle of the night, he had another vision – another dream from God – and, again, it was that darn Heavenly Host singing. He couldn’t understand the words, but [from] the powerful impact of what he felt, he knew that the very hand of God was upon him at that moment, and he couldn’t deny God any longer. He knew that these visions would continue until he did what God wanted him to do, anyway. So he said, “Alright, God, I get it. I will become a priest and I will go back.”

But it didn’t happen that fast. Patrick was 21 – maybe 22 – by that time and, to become a priest, you had to be at least 30 years old at that time. So, he had to go and study for eight or nine years, before he would even get the chance to go back to Ireland. Plus, Patrick had left and become a slave at the age of 15. His education stopped at 15 – and the priests were expected to be highly educated, in fact, often teaching others to become literate. He had to not only do all of the strenuous theological work to become a priest, but he had to catch up his education, so that he was smart enough to become one. Yet, that was what God asked.

But that wasn’t all. Patrick also had to go and find a bishop. We are talking about the early 400s A.D. There were no seminaries and, in fact, in Britain at that time there were very few Christians. There were hundreds of Christians – not thousands, not millions – hundreds. So he had to go looking for a bishop. Then he had to beg the bishop to teach him, even though he didn’t have enough education. But, if God wanted this, God would provide a way – and sure enough he did.

All of a sudden, here was Patrick begging the bishop. And the bishop, for some divine rite (we don’t know if the bishop was being pestered by the heavenly chorus, or what happened), but the bishop said, “Alright.”

So he studied. He was diligent. Patrick was hard-working and, all of a sudden, he became a deacon, and, he could be a deacon in his 20s. It was hard work. He had to be an

administrator for the bishop. He had to learn from the bishop. He had to do funerals and he had to do other things. It was demanding on top of the studies and catching up on his education. He did that for nine years.

Finally [Patrick] became a priest and God opened another door back to Ireland in the form of bishop problems. The bishop – at the time that Patrick became a priest – the bishop there was found to be a heretic. He started following the theology of a radical sect of Christianity. It was bad, and the Roman Catholic Church at that time cast him out of Ireland, and they sent – since he was such a good student and was so orthodox in his understanding, and because he knew how to listen to those Irish, and had experience in Ireland – they sent Patrick to Ireland to be supportive of the new Bishop.

Now the new bishop was a mess – I think emotionally unstable, from what you can read between the lines – and he fell apart so badly, that they had to throw him out of being a bishop, and he died at the very same time.

There was no one left. Most bishops were over 50 years old in the early 400s A.D., but no, no, because there was nobody left – especially anyone who had any real ability to relate to the Irish people – Patrick was made bishop, in his early 30s, of the entire country of Ireland.

He was overwhelmed with the responsibility. “But,” he said, “I’m not going to get into high theological debates,” which drove some people crazy. He was going to focus on the important things: His two-fold vision for how he was going to grow the Church of Ireland – 1.) He would seek out the Christians and provide care to them and, 2.) He would evangelize and share the truth of the freedom of the Gospel message to those who would be willing to listen – who were pagan.

Sounds simple enough; but it was incredibly difficult, and let me explain why: First of all, there were even fewer Christians in Ireland, and almost all of them were British slaves who had been dragged over the same way he had – by the neck. To get to them, he had to go visit the kings – and I say that plural – and kings were not like the King or Queen of England. In Ireland, the king was more like a Cherokee chieftain. There were a bunch of them. They all had their own little tribes, all around the country, and they were only safe within their little tribe; and, they would fight each other if they even stepped over the tribal line. The only person who was safe to cross the boundary from one tribe to another was the king and their immediate family, even if that family gave a seal – a letter that was sealed – saying, “I’m giving permission,” they still had to go to that king, and if that king didn’t want to accept that seal, they would kill them (Scott snaps his fingers) that fast.

So, the first thing that Patrick had to do was walk up to one of the kings. He went to the northwestern corner, where he had been a slave, went to that king – who might just kill him that day. He [Patrick] explained who he was. He came bringing whatever possessions he had (now we call it bribery), and gave it to him [the king] as an act of respect, and the king let this bishop – Patrick – go around his tribe, or territory, and speak to the slaves; because Patrick promised that he would be careful and not turn the slaves against the king.

He went around and evangelized. At first the Christians mauled him, because they didn’t have a person to give them communion. They weren’t baptized – many of them. They were thrilled to have a priest, especially a bishop, and it grew. Then he went from territory to

territory. Can you imagine those slaves giving what little they had to him, so that he had enough money to bribe – or honor – the next king, and then the king after that? (Almsgiving was used to bribe – or honor – the next king.)

Pretty soon other people who had been freed, who remained in Ireland, started listening – who were Christian – and they were able to give more money, so they could bribe – or honor – more of the kings, and pretty soon he could go anywhere in Ireland.

But he [Patrick] had another problem now, and they were called the Druids. The Druids were very powerful in Ireland during this time. The Druids were pagan priests and priestesses. They had amazing power. Some of the Druids even participated in human sacrifices. That was unusual, but it did happen; and, believe me, it put the fear of the gods in the people. They were scared to death of the Druids.

The Druids also had exceptional power to curse people. You pay a Druid enough money [and] they would curse your enemies. They had love potions they would mix up and give to people. They were wizards – sorcerers – and they were not happy with Patrick. It was bad enough when Patrick was going to his own slaves, but, all of a sudden, Patrick was beginning to reach out his message to pagans. They loved his message because no longer, as a Christian, did you have to be fearful, because Patrick told them, “Your curses don’t work; love potions don’t work.” God’s power was greater than all of these mystical things these Druids would concoct to get your money.

Well, no wonder they were overwhelmed and wanted to join, because this God was about love and grace – not manipulation and power. No wonder they fled from the Druids.

So the Druids got together, and they put together this amazing curse, and they would curse Patrick; and, when Patrick didn’t die, it made his power seem even greater. Pretty soon they were coming from all over, and Patrick had to worry not only at first that the kings would kill him, now he had to worry that the Druids would kill him. Yet, his ministry continued.

His ministry was profoundly affected by one pastoral theological statement. (You will never guess what it is.) He grew the Church by one word: celibacy. (Kind of like the Shakers, only it worked for Patrick). You are thinking, that’s not something that would work in the 21st century – how did it work in the fifth century?

It worked with women, because if you were a woman slave you could be abused or raped at any time without impunity. No wonder you would gravitate to somebody who would say, we respect the body and there should be no sex. They would find that freeing, but also even the pagan women – because they had no say, they had no power – they did whatever their husbands told them to do; and, many of them had babies over and over and over, until one of them caused them to die. Men lived into their 60s, but many women did not live past the age of 24, because of child birth. So now you had a religion where women could control their own bodies and control who would be in charge of them, so they became celibate and then they were freed from the control of a man in the Christian Church.

This is how monasteries and nunneries became popular, because the women then would go in there, and they would work together and support each other; but it was a cheerful thing – understandably – for the pagan fathers. They had an entire society based around giving their

daughters to the man who would then protect them, so that the father, when he knew he would die, would know in his heart that his daughters would be OK; taken care of in a society where women could not take care of themselves.

Now, all of a sudden, you have this priest or bishop walking around telling women to not have families; to go off in these places by themselves – to be celibate – and, they were doing it. No wonder it freaked out the establishment – the entire culture of Ireland – in the early 400's.

But, women came from all over. The Church grew, and it wouldn't matter whether it was kings who started to complain, or Druids that were making their threats, the Church grew, because Patrick met a need that half of the population needed to hear.

In that moment, his Church was now becoming as large as the entire Church in England. It was amazing; and, he would grow and it wouldn't matter. The kings now feared for their own people, because there were enough free, as well as slaves, that they wanted to be part of it; and, the kings now couldn't say, "no," to their own subjects – and they started to slowly convert to Christianity. The Druids remained influential, but they were not doing human sacrifices. They were getting poorer and poorer as they tried to peddle their love potions on the street.

Christianity had taken a foothold because of Saint Patrick.

Now, I tell that story today, because it is the same thing that was happening to the Apostle Paul. He went into a place that was either full of slaves, or full of pagan people, and he shared a message that the pagans wanted to hear and the slaves needed to hear.

Paul, as painful and difficult as it was, the Apostle Paul held onto this passage from 1 Corinthians 10:13, and I kind of know the King James better, and you have heard it a million times – probably paraphrased – as mine has turned into being: *No test or temptation has overtaken you that is not common to humanity, but with every test God provides a means of escape.* I even like the NRIV better: *God provides a way for you to endure.*

Paul held onto that statement – that passage of Scripture. I have said it a million times.

Whether you go in for surgery, you are praying with somebody who is hurt, that passage just comes to mind over and over; and, sometimes you're cursed at that passage – just jokingly, but not so [you] say, "Good Lord, how much can I [take] or do you want me [to take]? Or, how much can you think I can really endure?" But at the heart of it, that passage has kept me alive, and I am sure many of you kept you going – and it kept Paul going. I believe that it kept Patrick going in his darkest moments and, because they kept going, the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ continued to grow against all odds.

Next week we will look at the internal problems of Patrick, because the jealousy that the Druids had was nothing in comparison to what the Christian Church in Britain [had] – their jealousy – because of how well Patrick was doing in his Evangelism. But, that is for next week.

Amen.