

# PATRICK OF IRELAND STUDY GUIDE

By Simonetta Carr



Photo on left: Recent statue by sculptor Ken Thompson portraying Patrick as a pilgrim. By Andreas F. Bochert, Wikimedia Commons

Photo on top right: Statue of Patrick overlooking Mam Ean Pass. By Espresso Addict, Wikimedia Commons

Photo bottom right: Gallarus Oratory, in the county of Kerry, Ireland, built around the fifth century, is considered the oldest surviving church in Ireland. By K. Jahne. Wikimedia Commons

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## CHAPTER ONE

### From Rich Teenager to Penniless Slave

#### What do you remember?

What was the name of the town where Patrick was born?

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What was Patrick's name in Latin?

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What was Patrick's father's occupation?

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When Patrick was born, was Britain part of the Roman Empire?

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How old was Patrick when a band of slave traders raided his town?

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What was Patrick's task as a slave in Ireland?

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What lessons did Patrick learn as a slave in Ireland?

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## Different times

### Slavery

Life in Britain around the end of the Western Roman Empire was different from ours in many ways and similar in others. While they didn't have any of our modern inventions, the people of Britain enjoyed many of the things we like. Those with means, like Patrick's family, could afford a big villa with many comforts.

One of the main differences was that almost everywhere in the world people accepted slavery as a fact of life. They thought some people were born to be masters and some to be slaves. Even famous philosophers like Aristotle taught that. But slavery was different than it was in later centuries because it was not based on ethnicity. People could become slaves for many reasons, as the book explains. In any case, it was a cruel habit.

Some Christians throughout history spoke against slavery, but they were very few. The first one that we know is Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, who challenged the idea that people could own a person who really belonged to God and was made in God's image.

### Something to think about

Thinking back on his life, Patrick realized that it was God who took the initiative to bring him back to Himself, opening a heart that had lost all faith in Him. He said, *"The Lord opened my unbelieving heart so that, even with a late start, I became aware of my failings and began to turn with all my heart to the Lord my God. For He looked down on my low condition and had compassion on me, young and foolish as I was. He kept me before I knew Him and before I could tell the difference between good and evil. He protected me and consoled me as a father does for his son."*

The Bible has much to say about God's initiative. Since Adam's sin, we are by nature "dead in trespasses and sins," and dead people can't do anything. But God keeps His children before they turn to Him. In fact, He keeps them before they are even born (see Jer. 1:5; Ps. 139:13-16; Is. 44:2, 49:1; Rom. 8:29; Gal. 1:15; Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9).

This realization moved Patrick to pray. In fact, he prayed so much that people started to call him "Holy Boy." He didn't just pray for freedom or for other things he might have wanted. He prayed because he had discovered the joy of knowing God. Even in that case, he knew it was God's Spirit that moved him. He also started to care about the people around him, while before he said he didn't even care for himself.

Can you think of other people who have had a similar experience?

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## What does it mean?

**Decurion** – The word comes from the Latin *decem*, meaning “ten,” because it was initially used for a commander of a group of ten men. Later, it was also used for a member of a city council, which is what Calpurnius was.

**Patricius** – The name Patricius comes from the Latin *pater*, meaning “father.” In ancient Rome, a *patricius* was a member of the nobility, the fathers of the nation.

**Diaconus** – The word comes from the Greek *diakonos*, meaning “servant.” In the church, it was used pretty much like our word “deacon,” with different meanings. For some, it was (and is) a first level in the clergy. In today’s Presbyterian churches, this title is given to people who take care of the material needs of the congregation.

## Latin Roots

Can you think of English words that come from the Latin *decem*?

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Now think of English words that come from the Latin *pater*.

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## Social Studies

### Roman Rule in Britain

Britain had been under Roman rule since the year 43, when troops led by Emperor Claudius invaded the island. In 122, the Roman army built a wall (known as Hadrian's Wall) to mark the northern boundary of the empire. Liked or disliked, the Romans were able to keep relative peace on the island in spite of frequent tribal wars and enemies' invasions. In 410, however, Rome couldn't come to Britain's rescue during the Saxons' invasion, as it was too busy dealing with the shocking incursion of the Visigoths on their city. Historians mark this as the end of Roman Britain.

### Christianity in Britain

Christianity first arrived in Britain as it did in many other parts of the world – through traveling Christians who shared the good news of the gospel with those they met. Already in the third century, Tertullian wrote of “places of the Britons, inaccessible to the Romans but subject to Christ.” By the fourth century, when Patrick was born, the churches in Britain were already sending bishops to church councils. Frescos and mosaics in the Roman-styled villas of Frampton, Hinton St. Mary, and Lullingstone show Christian images (in the photo below, a fresco with the Christian symbol known as Chi-Rho, from the two initial letters of the Greek word ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, meaning Christ).<sup>1</sup>



**Activity:** Do you recognize the letters X and P in the picture? Do you know what the other two letters (α and ω) represent? If not, look for them in a Greek alphabet. Why do you think Christians added these letters to the Chi Rho? (Hint: see Revelation 1:8, 21:6, 22:13).

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Although the church in Britain was largely established when Patrick was born, there were still some serious challenges. Around the same time, a Celtic monk named Pelagius was teaching that human beings were able to earn their salvation through their own merits. He was rebutted by the famous African theologian Augustine of Hippo, who insisted that humans can't do anything good apart from God's grace. After 410, when Britain lost some of its communications with Rome, the teachings of Pelagius spread even more. Concerned about this huge problem, the bishops of Britain asked the bishops of Gaul (today's France) for help. Two bishops were appointed for this task: Germanus of Auxerre and Lupus of Troyes. You can read about them online.

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<sup>1</sup> Photo by I, Udimu, CC BY 2.5, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2461548>

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Escape

#### What do you remember?

What did Patrick hear in a dream?

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By the time Patrick had that dream, how long had he been in Ireland?

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What dangers did Patrick encounter on his trip to the coast?

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Who allowed Patrick to get on their ship?

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How did God answer Patrick's prayer for food?

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What did Patrick's parents ask him not to do after he returned home?

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## Writing

### Writing History - Facts and Suppositions

When writers know very little about a person or a situation, sometimes they add some logical suppositions - usually adding adverbs like “probably,” “possibly,” “most likely,” or verbs like “seem.” Find these words in chapter two of *Patrick of Ireland* and see if the author’s suppositions are justified.

First look at the text from Patrick: “It was there one night in my sleep that I heard a voice saying to me: “You have fasted well. Very soon you will return to your native country.” Again after a short while, I heard a someone saying to me: “Look – your ship is ready.” It was not nearby, but a good two hundred miles away. I had never been to the place, nor did I know anyone there. So I ran away then, and left the man with whom I had been for six years. It was in the strength of God that I went – God who turned the direction of my life to good; I feared nothing while I was on the journey to that ship.”

Now let’s look at some suppositions by the author of *Patrick of Ireland*. (We’ll do the first ones – from pages 17 and 18 – with you).

Page 17, first line: “Most likely, Patrick expected to spend the rest of his life as a slave.” Do you think this supposition is justified? Explain why or why not:

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Page 17, fourth line: “At first, he probably didn’t pay much attention to it, but then he heard the voice again.” Most likely, the author came to this conclusion because the voice spoke again. Do you think this supposition is justified? Explain why or why not:

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Page 17, first line of third paragraph: “Since he was probably near the west coast of Ireland...” Looking again at what Patrick wrote, why do you think the author came to this conclusion? Do you think this supposition was justified? Explain why or why not:

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Page 17, second line of third paragraph: “He walked for what seemed like two hundred miles...”

In his *Confession*, Patrick said, “a good two hundred miles away.” Why do you think the author used the word “seemed”? Do you think this supposition was justified? Explain why or why not:

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Page 18, first line: “It must have been summer...” In this case, the author explains her thinking: “because in ancient times, ships didn’t travel in the winter.” Do you think this supposition was justified? Explain why or why not:

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Page 18, second line: “So Patrick was probably able to find some nuts, berries, and other wild fruit to keep him going.” This supposition is based on the one before this: the idea that it must have been summer. Do you think this supposition was justified? Explain why or why not:

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If you like this exercise, continue to notice the key words throughout the book and give your opinion on the author’s suppositions.

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## Some Latin

Patrick wrote his *Confession* in Latin. Let's look at some of the words he used in the dialogues – words that the people in the Roman Empire used every day.

**Ecce!** – Translated “There!” in the dream where God tells Patrick his ship is ready. It can also be translated “here!” and it's used whenever you are pointing at something. The Latin Bible uses this word to translate Pilate's words when he pointed at the bleeding Christ: *Ecce homo!* “Here is the man (that you are accusing)!”

**Nequaquam** – Translated “No way!” in the first answer of the sailors to Patrick. It can also be translated “By no means!” or “Not at all!” It's a fun word to pronounce!

**Veni cito** – Translated “Come quickly!” The adverb *cito* is used in proverbs such as *Quod cito fit, cito perit* (“He who acts quickly, dies quickly” – in other words, be careful).

**Quid est?** – Translated “What is this?” in the sailors' question about Patrick's faith. In other words, they meant, “What's happening? We're starving while you are saying that your God is all powerful.”

## Different Times

### Reclining at Meals

Look at the image of the fresco on page 24 of your book. It shows people reclining at a meal. We find similar images in artwork by Greeks, Romans, and Etruscans. This doesn't mean, however, that these people always ate laying down. If you go to Pompeii, in Italy, you will see some ancient Roman “restaurants” that look like our fast-food places, for people who wanted a quick meal. But the same ancient populations reclined during special dinners, in a specific room furnished with dining couches. To do so, they rested one arm on cushions and used the other arm to reach for food.

Try it out by arranging a coffee table with some food in front of a couch and arranging some pillows on the couch so that you can rest one arm on them. If you are right-handed, you will rest the left arm on the pillows.

Now reach over with your other arm to take food and bring it to your mouth. Is it comfortable? Explain the advantages and disadvantages of this position:

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## CHAPTER THREE

### An Unexpected Call

#### What do you remember?

What did Patrick see in the dream he had at home?

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Why did Patrick think the call he heard in the dream was urgent?

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What convinced Patrick to return to Ireland?

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Why did Patrick wait some time before leaving for Ireland?

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How do we know that Patrick memorized much of the Bible?

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Why did Patrick need to be ordained as a bishop?

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Why did some bishops try to hold Patrick back?

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## Activity

### Make an Ancient Scroll

In Patrick's times, books and letters were written on strips of papyrus which were rolled up around two wooden rods. To read them, one had to unroll the papyrus from one rod and roll it into the other. Finding a specific part of the book could be difficult. That's why long books were divided into many scrolls. The scrolls Victorinus was carrying were letters.

To make a scroll, you will need:

One sheet of paper (8x4 is a good size)

One teabag

Two dowels

One string

Wet the teabag with warm water (or take a used teabag that is still wet). Rub it on both sides of your paper. Crumble the paper slightly. Both of these steps will make your paper look ancient.

Place your paper horizontally on the table. Spread a thin layer of glue on the two edges and place the two dowels on the glue. Then roll the edges of the paper around the dowels a couple of times. Let it dry.

Once your paper is dry, write a message for a friend, then roll the two edges to form a scroll. Tie it with the string, then give it to your friend.



Photo by Wolfgang Sauber, Wikimedia Commons

## Some Latin

In his *Confession*, Patrick often uses the Latin expression, *Nescio, Deus scit*, meaning, “I don't know, God knows.” Both *nescio* and *scit* come from the Latin verb *scire*, meaning “to know.” Our English word “science” comes from *scire*. Other English words deriving from *scire* are conscience, conscious, and omniscient.

(You will notice that these words use the sound “sh.” That's because the church has traditionally use this pronunciation when, in Latin, the letters “sc” come before an e or an i. Some scholars today challenge this pronunciation).

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### A stranger and a Wanderer

#### What do you remember?

How did the time that Patrick spent as a slave prepare him for his mission to Ireland?

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What risks did Patrick run in Ireland?

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What took the place of cities in Ireland?

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Why did Patrick go to the chiefs of a tribe before talking to the others?

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Why did Patrick take some of the chiefs' sons with him on his travels?

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How many tribes did Ireland have at that time?

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Describe a time when Patrick ran into trouble during his travels.

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Why did the chiefs dislike the idea that their sons and daughters may not get married?

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Why did the slaves who became Christian risk to be beaten?

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## Something to think about

Some bishops in Britain opposed Patrick's mission to the Irish for different reasons. Let's take them one by one.

1. "Why does this man put himself in danger among enemies who don't know God?" For people living in the Roman Empire, it was difficult to think of the enemies outside as potential brothers and sisters in Christ. This is what made Patrick's mission particularly important. Before him, many people spread the gospel through their travels. Once a country had a group of Christians, the church in a nearby place would send a bishop to lead them. But Patrick was the first person we know that went to a place outside the Roman Empire with the specific purpose to bring people to Christ. Those British bishops didn't know what we know now about missions. Think of other times when Christians had to change their minds about something they thought was right. What can this teach us?

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2. Some of the bishops didn't think Patrick qualified to be a bishop because of a sin he committed when he was fifteen. It must have been a terrible sin for them to bring it up after such a long time. But fifteen-year-old Patrick was a Christian only in name and had since then repented and changed. Do you think he was right in thinking he could still serve the church? Explain why (find a Bible verse to back your answer, if you can):

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The bishops also questioned Patrick's methods, because he did things differently than they did in Britain. They didn't understand that he had to adapt to the culture of the place where he lived. This is what most missionaries do today. For example, many churches in Africa (including Reformed churches, which are typically strict about worship) use drums to accompany their hymns. The British bishops didn't understand why Patrick didn't accept gifts of jewelry from Irish women. In Britain, these gifts would have been welcome as donations to the church, but Patrick thought the Irish people needed to know he was not there to get gifts. Do you think the bishops should have respected his opinions?

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Are there any times when a church in the mission field should not adapt to the local culture? Explain your answer.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## Bound by Love

### What do you remember?

How did Patrick start his *Confession*?

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How did he respond to the bishops' accusations that he may have returned to Ireland for personal gain?

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What Bible promise inspired him in his mission?

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### Something to think about

The British bishops could only see the Irish as enemies, but Patrick knew that the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ were for every people on the face of the earth. Can you think of any group of people that tends to be neglected by missionaries today?

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Patrick showed the Irish people that the things where they placed their trust could not help them. For example, since many of them worshipped the sun, he explained that the sun was just a part of God's creation, which moved at God's command. It is God who established the way the sun and planets move, and he can change their course any time. And while the sun will one day become unnecessary (See Revelation 21:23 and 22:5), the true Sun is Christ, whose light will never end (see Malachi 4:2). Today, few people still worship the sun, but many people place their trust in things other than God (money, politics, or some cosmic force). How can we explain to these people that all these things can let them down and will eventually end, while Christ is forever?

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## Language Studies

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## Similes

When Patrick said, “I was like a stone stuck into deep mud,” he used what we call a “simile.” Similes draw connections between things that seem to have nothing in common to paint an image in our minds. They are often more effective than a straightforward explanation. For example, Patrick could have said, “I was at a standstill and God took me out of that difficult situation.” Instead, he tells us that he was like a stone stuck in deep mud and that God placed him on top of a wall. Can you explain why this simile is more effective?

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The Bible uses many similes. For example, in Psalm 1, we read that the man who treasures God’s Word is “like a tree planted by the waters.” What image does this evoke in your mind?

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Can you find other examples of similes in the Scriptures? Write down one or two of them and explain what images they create in your mind.

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## Art

Look at the illustration on page 19. Instead of showing Patrick writing, the artist chose to focus on his hands. What do you think the artist was able to show through these hands? Do they tell you if Patrick was young or old? Do they look like the hands of someone who does manual work? Do you think the position of the left hand can tell you something about Patrick's feelings? What does the background suggest? Write your thoughts.

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## Cooking

Butter was a staple food of northern Europe. It's actually quite easy to make!

All you need is:

¼ cup of heavy cream

1 clear jar with lid, large enough to hold one cup or more of liquid

1 small mesh strainer

1 bowl

1 piece of plastic wrap, about 4 inches long

Pour the cream into the jar, close tightly, and shake it. This will take some time, so be persistent.

You will see the cream fill the whole jar. If you open the jar now, you will have whipped cream, which is delicious. But since you are trying to make butter, you should keep going.

Eventually, you will hear the sound of liquid splashing. This is called whey. You will see the whey separating from the butter. Shake a little longer until the butter is firm.

Place the strainer on a bowl and pour the contents of the jar into it. Spread your butter on bread or wrap it in the plastic wrap to refrigerate.

You can use the whey in pancakes, smoothies, or other recipes. It's high in protein, while the butter is high in fat.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Feeding and Protecting God's Sheep

#### What do you remember?

Who attacked the Irish community where Patrick was preaching?

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What had many members of that community done the day before the attack?

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What made Coroticus's crime worse?

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How did Patrick react?

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What gave Patrick some comfort?

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Why did Patrick set up communities (or monasteries) in Ireland?

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How important were these communities for their society after the Western Roman Empire collapsed?

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Why did Patrick teach his students to read Latin?

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Which other European communities took Patrick's monasteries as a model?

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## Something to think about

While Patrick tried to protect his fellow Christians from persecution and abuse, he could not protect them from sudden attacks in a violent society. Let's see how he reacted to Coroticus's attack.

1. His first reaction was deep sadness and confusion: "I do not know what to say or how I can say any more about the children of God who are dead, whom the sword has touched so cruelly. All I can do is what is written: 'Weep with those who weep.'"

Where can you find the last sentence in the Bible?

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Weeping sincerely with those who weep is very important. Especially today, when mass media allow us to see so many tragedies that happen all over the world, it's easy to become indifferent. What can we do to avoid this indifference and truly share the pain of others?

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2. Coroticus claimed to be a Christian and yet he committed horrible crimes. What's worse, he and his men laughed when Patrick asked them to repent. Throughout history, there have been many powerful men who pretended to be Christian because it was convenient or because it made a good impression on others. As a bishop, Patrick could only excommunicate these men from the church, meaning that they could not share in the Lord's Supper and were to be treated as unbelievers. Patrick told the churches not to even accept donations from these men. Of course, these measures were to be enforced only until these men repented.

Do you think this was a good move on Patrick's part?

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Does your church exclude from the Lord's Supper those who refuse to repent?

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3. Patrick said, "I don't know which is the cause of the greatest grief for me, whether those who were killed, or those who were captured, or those whom the devil so deeply trapped." He knew that those who had been killed were in heaven, so this was a source of consolation. The situation was more difficult for those who

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had been captured, since they were probably separated from their families and sold as slaves. But Coroticus and his men were in the worst possible situation because they were “deeply trapped” by the devil. When, after a tragedy, you pray for the victims, do you remember to also pray for the criminals who will meet a much worse future, unless they repent?

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4. Patrick didn't limit himself to weeping for those who weep and to writing a letter to the criminals. He also published this letter for all to see – a letter that we can still read today. While he didn't know if his letter had any effect, some scholars have found that the slave trade and other forms of violence decreased after Patrick's death. This shows the importance of speaking against injustices even when it seems that our words are not heard. Can you think of any time in your life when you spoke out against injustice? If so, write about it. If you can't think of any examples from your life, think of an example that you have seen or read about.
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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### After Patrick

#### What do you remember?

How fast did the gospel spread through Ireland?

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Name some Christians who followed Patrick's example of missionary work.

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How did Patrick's mission come full circle?

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Why do scholars believe that the story that Patrick stopped an invasion of snakes in Ireland is not true?

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Why is it unlikely that Patrick used the three leaves of the shamrock (a three-leaves clover) to represent the Trinity?

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Why do we celebrate St. Patrick's Day on March 17?

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When did people start feasting and drinking on St. Patrick's Day?

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How did they celebrate it before then?

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## FROM PATRICK'S PEN

### Writing practice

Look at how Patrick started his *Confession*. If you wrote a book about your life, how would you start it?

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### What does it mean?

**Presbyter** – This is the word Patrick used to describe his grandfather's vocation. The word comes from the Greek *presbyteros*, meaning "older" or, in this context, "elder." The word "priest" comes from the same Greek term. Presbyterian churches owe their name to the fact that they are overseen by elders.

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## CONCLUSION

What did you learn from Patrick?

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If you had to describe Patrick with three nouns, which ones would you choose?

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Do the same with three adjectives

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Now try to describe his actions with three verbs

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Now describe his actions with three adverbs

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## Sound Teachings

As we saw in the beginning of his study guide, Patrick lived at a time when the church was battling different heresies (unbiblical teachings). One of these was the heresy of Arius, a priest from North Africa who taught that Jesus was not fully God. Arius's teachings were condemned at the Council of Nicea. As you have noticed, Patrick was faithful to the Nicene Creed.

Another heresy was being spread by Pelagius, a Celtic monk (from either England or Ireland), who taught that human beings have the ability to save themselves, "assisted by grace," which is something they need to deserve or merit.

You may have heard people say, "God helps those who help themselves." This saying is not in the Bible and is quite Pelagian.

We know that Patrick did not fall for Pelagius's teachings from the things he wrote in his *Confession*. Find some quotes in your book where Patrick attributes all his progress in life and in faith to God's mercy and grace and not to his own achievements. For example,

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## Other Resources

Listen to “Patrick of Ireland” on *Kids Talk Church History* podcast, with guest Philip Freeman <https://kidstalkchurchhistory.podbean.com/e/patrick-of-ireland/>

Philip Freeman’s book, *St. Patrick of Ireland: A Confession*, is a great resource for teenagers <https://www.amazon.com/St-Patrick-Ireland-Philip-Freeman/dp/0743256344>

You can read Patrick’s *Confession* here. It’s an easy read! [https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio\\_english#](https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_english#)

Here is Patrick’s letter to the soldiers of Coroticus [https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/epistola\\_english#](https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/epistola_english#)

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